

**RECLAIMING BUDDHIST SITES IN MODERN INDIA: PILGRIMAGE AND
TOURISM IN SARNATH AND BODHGAYA**

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Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to my beloved mummy and papa,

*I am grateful to my parents for being so understanding and supportive throughout this
journey.*

Abstract

The promotion of Buddhist pilgrimage sites by the Government of India and the Ministry of Tourism has accelerated since the launch of the Incredible India Campaign in 2002. This thesis focuses on two sites, Sarnath and Bodhgaya, which have been subject to contestations that precede the nation-state's efforts at gaining economic revenue. The Hindu-Buddhist dispute over the Buddha's image, the Saivite occupation of the Mahabodhi Temple in Bodhgaya, and Anagarika Dharmapala's attempts at reclaiming several Buddhist sites in India have led to conflicting views, motivations, and interpretations. For the purpose of this thesis, I identify the primary national and transnational stakeholders who have contributed to differing views about the sacred geography of Buddhism in India. Furthermore, I discuss the extent to which the marketing of these Buddhist pilgrimage sites as tourist destinations has shaped, altered, or intensified the contested nature of Sarnath and Bodhgaya.

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List of Abbreviations

ASI	Archaeological Society of India
BHU	Banaras Hindu University
BJP	Bhartiya Janata Party
BTMC	Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee
CIHTS	The Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies
FICCI	Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry
HUDCO	Housing and Urban Development Corporation
IBC	International Buddhist Conclave
IIC	Incredible India Campaign
IRCTC	Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation
JBIC	Japan Bank of International Cooperation
JNNURM	Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission
MSJ	Mahabodhi Society Journal
NPS	National Park Services
OBCs	Other Backwards Classes
OECD	Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund
PATA	Pacific Asia Travel Award
PRASAD	Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive
SIGA	Strategic Initiatives & Government Advisory
UNESCO	United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization
UP	Uttar Pradesh
WHS	World Heritage Site

Glossary

Bhumisparsha Mudra	earth-touching gesture
Dharma	Buddhist religious teachings (in Hinduism: duty, law, righteousness)
Giri	Mountain sect of the Saiva Dasanami order, ascetics tracing their origin to Sankara
Linga(m)	phallic symbol for the Hindu deity Siva
Mahant	spiritual leader
Mulagandha Kuti Vihara	ancient temple complex in Sarnath; modern-day Sri Lankan temple also located in Sarnath
Parinirvana	Perfected nirvana after death
Pipal	a fig tree; sacred Bodhi or Bo tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment
Raksasa	a demon
Saiva, Saivite	pertaining to Hindu god Siva
Sangha	Buddhist community (including laity); the Buddhist monastic order, including monks, nuns, and novices.
Stupa	domed structure enshrining Buddhist relics; burial mound
Tathagata	“one who has thus come or gone”
Vaisnava	pertaining to Hindu god Visnu
Vihara	Buddhist monastery
<i>Visnu Purana</i>	Vaisnava-centered religious literature; contains ancient myths
Visnu	Hindu Lord of Preservation, Protector of Dharma; incarnates from time to time in various avataras

Introduction

Ananda, there are four places the sight of which will arouse strong emotion in those with faith. Which four? 'Here the Tathagata was born', this is the first place. 'Here the Tathagata attained Enlightenment', this is the second place. 'Here the Tathagata set in motion the Wheel of the Dhamma', this is the third place. 'Here the Tathagata attained final Nirvana without remainder', this is the fourth place. The monk or nun, layman or laywoman, who has faith should visit these places. And anyone who dies while making a pilgrimage to these places with a devout heart will, at the breaking up of the body, be reborn in heaven.

- BuddhaNet Website, 2017

Pilgrimage and Tourism

Pilgrimage, in the simplest terms, is a concept that incorporates themes of leaving one's home, going to places where significant events associated with holy figures have occurred, and performing acts of veneration at these sites. The reasons for such journeys are multitudinous – it may be a means of gaining merit, eradicating past sins, or praying for a miraculous cure from sickness.¹ While it has unclear origins, tourism has historically been associated with religious pilgrimages.² Even one of the most cited sources on pilgrimage, Victor and Edith Turners' *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, states that “a tourist is half a pilgrim, if a pilgrim is half a tourist,” which alludes to the close and often blurred relationship between the two concepts.³ Similarly, in their literature

¹ Ian Reader, *Pilgrimage: A very Short Introduction* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015), 20-21.

² Ian Reader, *Making Pilgrimages: Meaning and Practice in Shikoku* (Honolulu: University of Hawai'i Press, 2005), 37.

³ Victor Turner and Edith Turner, *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1978), 20.

review on tourist-pilgrim dichotomy, Olsen and Timothy have stated that “a ‘pilgrim’ is a tourist (religious tourist) who is motivated by spiritual or religious factors.”⁴

In one of the earliest studies on religious tourism, Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan discussed the European religious system as consisting of both non-tourist and tourist religious attractions, shrines, and festivals. They highlighted the difference between ‘pious’ pilgrims and ‘secular’ tourists and noted that:

Regardless of their motivations, all visitors to these attractions require some level of services, ranging from providing for the most basic of human needs, to full commercial development that rivals the most secular resort. Faced with the problems of administering the wide variety of travel destinations associated with their faith, officials of the Roman Catholic Church in Europe often use the term *religious tourism* to describe the system that encompass a range of holy places..., the service facilities associated with them, and the spectrum of visitors from the devout to the secular.⁵

Furthermore, Nolan and Nolan state that although the visitors at religious shrines may range from extremely pious pilgrims to indifferent tourists, there seems to be no glaring dichotomy between the two since “many fall into the range of intermediate categories.”⁶

Another important study on the relationship between tourism at religious sites was conducted by Geoffrey Wall and Alister Mathieson (2006), and it addressed some concerns about the negative aspects of tourism, which viewed mass tourism as a destructive force that will eventually result in the “Westernization of traditional

⁴ Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy, "Tourism and Religious Journeys," In *Tourism, Religion and Spiritual Journeys*, ed. Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy (London and New York: Routledge, 2006), 7.

⁵ Mary Lee Nolan and Sidney Nolan, "Religious Sites as Tourism Attractions in Europe," *Annals of tourism research* 19, no. 1 (1992): 69.

⁶ Nolan and Nolan, "Religious Sites as Tourism Attractions in Europe," 69.

cultures.”⁷ Moreover, Wall and Mathieson identify three primary forms of culture that attract tourists, and are subject to change:

- a) inanimate forms of culture, such as historical buildings and monuments or traditional arts and crafts;
- b) forms of culture which are reflected in the normal, day-to-day life and activities of people in destination societies;
- c) animated forms of culture, involving the participation of people, such as religious events, carnivals, and traditional festivals.⁸

Wall and Mathieson acknowledge that the development of sacred places for tourism, with the diffusion of spiritual motivation, may turn these sites into famous tourist attractions.⁹ For the purpose of this thesis, my discussion on religious tourism will be based on Nolan and Nolan’s acknowledgment that this term can include pious and secular tourists, as well as the services and facilities available to them. Building on Wall and Mathieson’s observations, I will also be indicating the ways in which the Government of India has promoted heritage sites, such as the Mahabodhi Temple Complex, Buddhist festivals, and Buddhist sites in general.

While using the term ‘pilgrim,’ I will be referring to those who are religiously motivated to visit the site, in contrast to ‘tourists’ who are interested in the cultural, traditional or archaeological aspects of the sites. Since I see pilgrimage and tourism as

⁷ Throughout this thesis, I acknowledge that “modernization” and “Westernization” are not synonymous terms, as will be illustrated via modern Buddhist Anagarika Dharmapala’s revitalization of Buddhism in India. According to Lopez (2002: xxxix), modern Buddhism, which is shaped by both Asian and non-Asian reformers, is “an international Buddhism that transcends cultural and national boundaries.” For a critical review of modern Buddhism, see *A Modern Buddhist Bible: Essential Readings from East and West*, (Boston: Beacon Press, 2002).

⁸ Wall and Mathieson (2006: 262), citation found in Richard Sharpley, *Tourism, tourists and society* (Routledge, 2018).

⁹ Geoffrey Wall and Alister Mathieson, *Tourism: Change, Impacts, and Opportunities* (Pearson Education, 2006), 251.

interrelated practices, which are variant parts of religious tourism according to Olsen and Timothy (2006), the distinction is merely descriptive (as opposed to evaluative). Furthermore, I utilize the definition of religious tourism as published by the Federation of Indian Chambers of Commerce & Industry (FICCI) and Yes Bank Ltd. in a document published in 2012, entitled “Diverse Beliefs: Tourism of Faith, Religious Tourism Gains Ground.” The components of the document are compiled by members of the Strategic Initiatives & Government Advisory (SIGA) Team, according to whom religious tourism includes “travel with the core motive of experiencing religious forms, or the products they induce, like art, culture, traditions, and architecture.” Additionally, religious tourism is divided into two forms: faith tourism by domestic travelers who have a spiritual attachment to a deity or religious destination, or a “foreign tourist, someone belonging to a different religion, region, or country, for whom the destination and the religious practices have the dimension of ‘novelty,’ a spiritual experience different from their own.” Religious tourism is further divided into nine categories: pilgrimages, missionary travel, leisure vacations, faith-based cruising, crusades and conventions, retreats, monastery visits, faith-based camps, and religious tourist attractions. According to the authors from the SIGA Team, the pilgrims and the tourists fall under the same category, but the pilgrim’s journey is faith-based and the foreign tourist’s travel is motivated by an interest in different experiences. The identification of these motivations has been utilized via the Incredible India campaign launched in 2002, which will be discussed in subsequent chapters.

Buddhist Pilgrimage Sites in India: Background on Sites of Interest

Traditionally, pilgrimage has been defined as a physical journey in search for truth, enlightenment, or a spiritual experience with the divine. While there is certainly a

psychological and spiritually transformative aspect to a pilgrim's journey,¹⁰ it may also allow one to symbolically and temporarily equate their experiences with the life of religious figures or founders. In Buddhism, for instance, following the footsteps of the Buddha is often an important element in pilgrimage. By visiting the four key sites, a pilgrim has the opportunity to replicate the Buddha's journey and temporarily leave behind their everyday world.¹¹ The most important sites in Buddhism include the place of his birth (Lumbini, Nepal), his enlightenment (Bodhgaya),¹² his first teaching (Sarnath), and his *parinirvana* (Kushinagar).¹³

Sarnath: Where the Buddha Turned the Wheel of Dharma

Sarnath is a town in Uttar Pradesh (UP), and it is 10 km north of Varanasi, which is especially significant for Hindu pilgrimage. Varanasi is considered the most sacred city among Hindus. It is also known as the "cultural capital" of India. Many Hindus believe that one must go on pilgrimage to Varanasi at least once in a lifetime. Pilgrims may also go to Varanasi for a symbolic purification via a dip in the Ganges or to immerse the ashes of a deceased loved one.¹⁴ Sarnath holds significance as the place where the Buddha was

¹⁰ For information on pilgrimage (*tirthayatra*) according to the Hindu belief, see Rana PB Singh, "Pilgrimage in Hinduism," In *Tourism, religion and spiritual journeys*, ed. Daniel H. Olsen and Dallen J. Timothy (London and New York: Routledge, 2006).

¹¹ The phenomenological or metaphysical aspects of pilgrimage are not the focus of this study, but this is important to note as it sets the tone for the significance of Buddhist pilgrimage sites associated with the events of the Buddha's life. See Reader, *Pilgrimage*, 24-25.

¹² Throughout history, Bodhgaya has been spelled disparately as Boodha Gaya, Buddha Gaya, Bodhi Gaya, Bodh Gaya, Bodhgaya, and Bauddha Gyah. Shravasti Dhammika, who is a lecturer and Buddhist monk, explains that all these variant forms of Bodhgaya are a recent development, and that at the time of the Buddha, the town was called Uruvela. For the purpose of standardization, I will be using the term 'Bodhgaya' throughout this thesis.

¹³ As Leoshko (1998) remarks, these four sites are part of a larger list of eight sites that have collectively "come to define sacred Buddhist geography in the 20th century." The other four sites are: Sravasti, Rajgrha, Vaisali, and Samkasya. For detailed information on how these sites have been 're-invented' by modern Buddhists and non-Buddhists, see Toni Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn: Pilgrimage and the Tibetan Reinvention of Buddhist India* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), 27.

¹⁴ Singh, "Pilgrimage in Hinduism," 230.

believed to have taught his first sermon. The small town of Sarnath consists of an archaeological and excavation area, the Deer Park, Dhamekh Stupa Chaukhandi Stupa, Dharmarajika Stupa, Sarnath Archaeological Museum (which houses the Asokan Lion-Capital), ancient and modern (Sri Lankan temple) Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, and temples constructed or sponsored by Tibetan, Japanese, Sri Lankan, Thai, Korean, Vietnamese, and Burmese Buddhists. Most of these temples also have monasteries or lodges that are associated with the respective countries, and there are two Tibetan educational institutions in Sarnath, including a Tibetan university.

Since summers can be extremely hot in the Gangetic plains, the height of tourist activity in Sarnath is typically between November and April. The monsoons from June to August may cause disruptions in travel and the erosion of roads and bridges. Travel from Varanasi to Sarnath (and vice versa) is usually slow and inconvenient. Upon arrival, tourists may find that there is limited information at the tourist center. There is also a lack of signs that may help with directions or explanations regarding the location or significance of some of the religious sites (Buddhist, Jain or Hindu).

The archaeological and excavation sites, perhaps due to the lack of World Heritage status, have been under the management of the Archaeological Survey of India but have been used as walkways or picnic tables by visitors. This observation also points to a lack of informational signs and general awareness among those who visit the site. Sarnath, unlike Bodhgaya, has yet to be fully included in the national and state government's developmental plans. However, the presence of some new attractions points to a steady interest from other Buddhist countries, as well as an increasing engagement at the state level.

Observations from my fieldwork in Sarnath will begin to fill some of the gaps in academic research regarding Buddhist sites in India. There are certainly some authors, including Bhattacharya (1924); Orland and Bellafiore (1990); Agrawal, Choudhary and Tripathi (2010); Anuradha Singh (2013, 2014); and Ananda Singh (2014) who have contributed to information on Sarnath. In a few other sources, information on Sarnath has been presented in the form of a chapter, a paragraph, or just a footnote. While other sources have focused on the historiography and the archaeological aspects of Sarnath, I intend to bring to light some of the ways in which religious or leisure tourism has, or will have, an impact on the town. In order to identify and understand some of the conflicts that have hindered or affected tourism or pilgrimage, I decided to experience the site as an observational and curious tourist. I also did not stay at any of the lodges or monasteries, which were specifically targeted at Buddhist pilgrims, due to a lack of vacancy and availability of information via the internet. I believe that staying in Varanasi allowed me to have similar experiences to some of the international tourists I met during my fieldwork, which I will be discussing shortly.

Bodhgaya: Where the Buddha Attained Enlightenment

Bodhgaya is a small town located in the central Indian province of Bihar, notoriously known for its poverty, lawlessness, and backwardness.¹⁵ The idea of a 'backwardness' generally refers to the rigid and hierarchical Hindu class and caste systems. In order to politically and socially address the many groups that fall into these categories, the Government of India developed labels such as “Other Backward Classes,” “Schedule Castes” and “Scheduled Tribes,” referring to those at the bottom of the

¹⁵ David Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism and spiritual tourism in Bodhgaya, Bihar," *Anthropology Today* 24, no. 3 (2008): 11.

hierarchy.¹⁶ Generally, they consist of small and marginal farmers, agricultural laborers, artisans, and other groups considered “educationally and economically backward.” The OBCs, consisting of over 3000 castes and sub-castes, formed 41% of India’s population in a survey conducted 2004-2005. While class discrimination is theoretically illegal, the OBCs and other lower classes face discrimination, and often have minimal access to health care, education, employment, and housing.¹⁷ The social politics regarding class and caste identities are still very much a reality for the state, but the development in Bodhgaya since 2002 has helped Bodhgaya elevate its image on the national and international platform.

Contemporary pilgrimage to Bodhgaya has transformed Bodhgaya’s rural agrarian landscape into an international town composed of five-star hotels, Buddhist temples and monasteries, restaurants, and shopping plazas.¹⁸ As the place where the Buddha is believed to have attained enlightenment, Bodhgaya has become, as David Geary states, the “navel of the earth” for Buddhist groups from around the world.¹⁹ The Mahabodhi Temple complex, which is perhaps the most visited structure in Bodhgaya, has been subjected to desolation, restoration, and reconstruction. As a result, Bodhgaya has become a site of multiple claims, memories, histories, and narratives. In addition to the Mahabodhi Temple, the town of Bodhgaya has gained international recognition among Buddhists. Bodhgaya attracts millions of pilgrims and tourists each year, which has led to

¹⁶ *The National Commission for Backward Classes Act* was passed in 1993, to better manage matters of rights, inclusion, and complaints to the government.

¹⁷ See *Annual Report*, (New Delhi: Planning Commission, 2013-2014), http://planningcommission.gov.in/reports/genrep/ann_e13_14.pdf.

¹⁸ Kory Goldberg, "Buddhists Without Borders: Transnational Pilgrimage, Social Engagement, and Education in the Land of Enlightenment" (Université du Québec à Montréal, 2011), 50.

¹⁹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism," 11.

rapid economic development through the efforts of transnational Buddhist groups and the Indian government.²⁰

Methodological Considerations and Limitations

While conducting fieldwork in Sarnath, I stayed in Varanasi. This gave me the opportunity to have casual conversations with the hotelier, the hotel staff, the taxi and rickshaw drivers, the restaurant owners, and some of the international tourists I encountered throughout my journey. This also allowed me to experience life in Varanasi and Sarnath and helped shed some light on non-Buddhist tourist's motivations for traveling to Sarnath. I stayed in Varanasi for four complete days in the month of November, which is a very popular time for tourists, and I took day trips to Sarnath each day. Due to the amount of time I spent in Sarnath (which I learned was atypical), I had the chance to get to know a few of the local shop vendors. Most of the information on Sarnath is from personal observations, informal conversations, and secondary sources. By personal observations, I mean generally "hanging out" and having conversations while recording interesting information and observations that stood out to me while chatting with others.²¹ I took pictures where I was allowed to, which enabled me to capture important information regarding the history of the various sites I visited. For more information on Sarnath and Bodhgaya, I referred to government documents and scholarly secondary sources.

²⁰ Since Bodhgaya's landscape and significance has been studied extensively, a detailed background on the site is beyond the scope of this chapter. For more detailed information on Bodhgaya, see Alan Trevithick (1988, 1999, 2006) and David Geary (2008, 2009).

²¹ Since all of my conversations were informal, I felt that jotting down my notes right in front of the other person may be uncomfortable, as Emerson, Fretz and Shaw (2011: 5) note, it sets the ethnographer apart as "something of an outsider," and it might break the flow of the dialogue, as indicated by Kory Goldberg (2011: 27). As a result, I jotted down most of my notes after the conversations occurred, whether it was in the hotel room, a park, or a restaurant. My dad's ability to understand the regional dialect, and my fluency in Hindi allowed the local respondents to speak freely, and our communication was not lost in translation.

Some key sources that have contributed to my understanding of Bodhgaya include David Geary's (2009) dissertation entitled "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism and the Global Bazaar in Bodh Gaya, Bihar," and several other sources he has published since, including his latest book *The Rebirth of Bodhgaya: Buddhism and the Making of a World Heritage Site* published in 2017. Geary conducted fieldwork in Bodhgaya extensively between 2005 and 2007, and then again in 2011 and 2013. For his research, Geary's methods are primarily ethnographic: participant observation, interviews, and surveys. Geary's texts serve as a framework for my analysis, which recognizes Bodhgaya as a place of global connection. Instead of defining Bodhgaya as a tourist or pilgrimage site, he examines "the tensions between these multifaceted social forms as an integral part of place construction."²² Furthermore, understanding the contemporary forms of Buddhist pilgrimage and tourism requires an awareness of the sites' historical roots, the ways in which traces of the past have shaped the pilgrimage, and continue to do so in modern-day India. As places of transnational pilgrimage and tourism, Sarnath and Bodhgaya must be understood within their historical, social, and political context. The emphasis on the history of the sites alone is not sufficient, and as Jill Dubisch noted during her research on pilgrimage in Greece, pilgrimage sites:

can be understood only as a setting for a wide range of behaviors, embodying multiple meanings and goals, and as both a part and a manifestation of many other aspects of a society – historical, social, political, and religious. [Pilgrimage occurs] within a particular context, but

²² David Geary (2017: 9) points out that the two dominant theoretical approaches to the study of pilgrimage, Turner and Turner (1978) and Eade and Sallnows (1991), have become "intellectual straitjackets that have prevented other forms of analysis." He argues that the disparate meanings and the multitude of conflicting forces do not resonate with clear-cut and rigid dichotomies. The idea of a theoretical "straitjacket" also refers to restrictions placed on works that rely on theories that only study pilgrimage in relation to religion, as discussed by Simon Coleman (2002). Geary's (2017: 9) approach draws on Anna Tsing's (2005) concept of global connection and its relationship to "friction: the awkward unequal, unstable, and creative quality of interconnection across difference." See David Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya: Buddhism and the Making of a World Heritage Site* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2017).

also within the context of national – and international – religious tradition, and in a political environment that is both reflected in and shaped by events that occur at the place of pilgrimage.²³

Alan Trevithicks's (2006) text, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya (1811-1949): Anagarika Dharmapala and the Mahabodhi Temple*, has also been an important source for critical information on the Hindu-Buddhist dispute at Bodhgaya, Anagarika Dharmapala's role in reclaiming Buddhist sites in India, and a brief biography that documents his journey as a Buddhist revivalist. Both texts have studied Bodhgaya and the revival of Buddhism comprehensively. These texts serve as important sources for my analysis, but none of them exclusively address other Buddhist sites tied to the Buddha's sacred geography. Geary (2018) recently published an article on the promotion of Buddhist sites by the Government of India. However, to my knowledge, there are limited sources on Buddhist pilgrimage and secular tourism in Sarnath. As I mentioned earlier, Uttar Pradesh has primarily focused on its Hindu Circuits for a long time, and Sarnath's proximity to Varanasi has overshadowed its significance as a pilgrimage and a tourist site. Therefore, this thesis seeks to contribute to an understanding of two distinct Buddhist sites that have witnessed different stages of development, reclamation, and contestation.

Due to the short period of time I spent in Sarnath, I understand there are some limitations to my study. However, in addition to my fieldwork, I analyzed heritage and tourism policies and city development plans prepared by the national and state governments to understand how these have shaped or attempted to shape the overall development of Sarnath and Bodhgaya. Through a comparative analysis of Sarnath and

²³ Source found in Reader, *Making Pilgrimages*, 34.

Bodhgaya, I address the following questions: in what ways is the Buddhist pilgrimage being reshaped and redefined via tourism? Who are the national and transnational stakeholders at the two sites? The key question I intend to shed light on is, how have the motivations and interests of the Indian government's tourism department altered (or intensified) the contested nature of Bodhgaya and Sarnath? Below is a brief overview of the chapters for this study.

Overview of Chapters

Chapter one delves into the historical narrative regarding Buddhism's apparent demise in India, the relevance of Sarnath and Bodhgaya after the Buddha's time, the Hindu-Buddhist debate regarding the Mahabodhi Temple Complex in Bodhgaya, and the Indian nation-state's interest in Buddhism. The purpose of this chapter is to establish that the transnational nature of the sites is not a new phenomenon, and to draw attention to the ways in which the significance attached to the sites, especially to the Mahabodhi Temple, was amplified due to the interests of figures like Sir Edwin Arnold and Anagarika Dharmapala.

Chapter two focuses on the commodification of Buddhism via the Incredible India campaign, developmental projects and policies for the enhancement of religious tourism, and the fieldwork I conducted in Sarnath. In this chapter, I discuss my observations and personal experiences from my fieldwork and evaluate some of the impeding factors that have affected tourism in Sarnath. This also includes an examination of the government documents regarding the lack of promotion of the Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh. I emphasize, however, that although Sarnath is not exclusively a popular hub for pilgrims

or tourists (in comparison to Bodhgaya), the newer attractions point to an interest in the site from other Buddhist countries.

In chapter three, I discuss the role of the coveted status of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a UNESCO World Heritage Site. I also discuss the various ‘Master Plans’ that were devised by the Government of India, Ministry of Tourism, and the state Government of Bihar in order to facilitate and maintain this new status of the site. I again shift my focus to the marketing campaigns that have redefined the state of Bihar as “blissful.” Furthermore, I examine how the various policies and plans have affected the local residents’ experiences.

To conclude the thesis, I will summarize the topics I have discussed, as context for addressing the questions asked in this introduction. Along with providing answers, I will note areas that require further examination through a comparative analysis of Bodhgaya and Sarnath. I aim to show how Buddhism has become a cultural commodity, which has become a resourceful tool for India’s tourism economy and image branding.

The Reclamation of Buddhist sites in India

I found it enormously helpful in understanding Buddhism to know about the context within which these teachings were given... [t]o recognize that Buddhism has emerged always—well, not always, but in many cases—out of its interactions, sometimes conflicted interactions, with competing religions like Hinduism or Confucianism and that Buddhism cannot exist in some sort of idealistic space which is unaffected by these other forces... I find that history in a sense is a very beautiful illustration of what the Buddha calls *pratityasamutpada*, conditioned arising, dependent origination... Buddhism itself is a product of its own circumstances, of the cultures where it's been effective, of historical needs, political structures, economic structures, and so on. When you translate that into a more concrete form, then I find there's a certain parallel in visiting these sites where some key events in Buddhist history took place... You put your body in these places. You hear the same birdsong. You breathe the same air. You are surrounded by the same trees and foliage that the Buddha may have been surrounded by. And that, somehow, gets you as close as you ever can physically to the source of the teachings that you are practicing in your daily life... I found it rather refreshing and rather grounding to be able to be in an intimate relationship with the tradition despite not [being] able to construct a coherent conceptual narrative around what I'm doing.

- Stephen Batchelor, "The Atheist Pilgrim," *Tricycle Magazine*, 2012

When I first developed an interest in Buddhism, I was fascinated by the different attitudes people had towards the religion. While a few of my peers, mostly from China and South Korea, were quite devoted to the tradition and performed Buddhist rituals at home, others were interested in its philosophy. Moreover, a few of my friends had admitted to learning about Buddhism via self-help books. Buddhism had so many functions – it was a religion, or a philosophy or a way of life, or a framework for a self-help book found on the shelves of a bookstore. It was linked to mental health, meditation, and mindfulness. However, none of these views resonated with the views about Buddhism I had grown up with. When I was growing up in India, I was taught that the

Buddha was an *avatara* of the Hindu deity Visnu.²⁴ Buddhism was not taught as one of the major world religions, but the history of Gautama Buddha was incorporated into the lessons about Hinduism. Despite these variant understandings about Buddhism, I cannot argue that one is more *authentic* than the other. I can argue, however, that my first encounter with Buddhism points to a dynamic relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism, and the contested meanings attached to important Buddhist sites, images, and symbols.

There is a general consensus that India witnessed the birth and rise of Buddhism more than two millennia ago and its decline approximately one millennium ago. Buddhism arose in the fifth century BCE with the birth, awakening, and teachings of the Buddha, followed by the spread of his teachings and disciples within and beyond the Indian subcontinent via Buddhist patronage. The patronage of emperor Asoka (dated to the third century BCE) has been highly regarded as the central force behind sending Buddhist emissaries, reorganizing the *sangha*, and building and restoring several Buddhist structures and stupas. The final decline of Indian Buddhism is dated during the early medieval period (ca. 600-1200 C.E.).²⁵ One of the primary reasons for Indian Buddhism's decline suggests that Muslim Turks destroyed monasteries and other Buddhist institutions.²⁶ Another explanation, drawn from the travel accounts of Faxian and

²⁴ Visnu, the lord of preservation, is one of the most prominent gods in the Hindu tradition. Growing up in India, I learned that Visnu's ninth *avatara* (incarnation) is considered to be the Buddha. As I address later in the chapter, this incarnation of Visnu has some negative connotations.

²⁵ David Geary and Sraman Mukherjee, "Buddhism in Contemporary India," In *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism*, ed. Michael K Jerryson (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016), 38.

²⁶ Upinder Singh, "Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India," *South Asian Studies* 26, no. 2 (2010): 193.

Xuanzang, suggests that the Buddhist *sangha*'s decline began as early as the fifth century and that later forms of Mahayana Buddhism were absorbed by Hinduism.²⁷

However, this simplified historical narrative has come under increasing scrutiny in light of new textual and archaeological evidence.²⁸ Moreover, several scholars (Kinnard, 1998; Geary, 2009; Singh, 2010; Khetri, 2011) agree that Buddhism never *completely* left the Indian subcontinent. According to Singh, although there was a relative decline in the Buddhist *sangha* and laity in India, "Buddhism survived on the margins... but its revival, rather its reinvention, in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries seems to be largely a result of completely new factors and forces."²⁹ The exile of the Tibetan Buddhist population, the conversion of Ambedkarite Dalits, the promotion of spiritual or religious tourism by the Government of India, and the increased interest in the conservation of ancient Buddhist sites in India by other Asian countries (especially Japan), have been important factors in the revitalization of the Indian Buddhist Circuit and of reinvention of Buddhism in modern India.³⁰ Consequently, the image of India as the homeland of Buddhism has become significantly important, and Buddhism's association with non-violence has been inextricably intertwined with Indian nationalism. I want to stress that the recognition of India as a Buddhist holy land is not a new phenomenon, and I agree with Singh that the revivalist movement in India has in some way complicated or reinvented meanings attached to Buddhist sites in India.

²⁷ David Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism and the Global Bazaar in Bodh Gaya, Bihar" (PhD Dissertation, University of British Columbia, 2009), 25, <https://open.library.ubc.ca/cIRcle/collections/ubctheses/24/items/1.0068498>.

²⁸ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 5.

²⁹ Singh, "Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India," 194.

³⁰ Singh, "Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India," 194.

Early Pilgrimage and Restorations at Isipatana (Sarnath)

Sarnath became an important pilgrimage site since the Buddha had taught his first sermon, which could be attributed to its close proximity to Varanasi. In addition to pilgrimage, Sarnath was a popular place for monastic centers and Buddhism prospered at the site due to support from many kings.³¹ Emperor Asoka (273 – 232 BCE), a great patron of Buddhism and the emperor of the Mauryan Empire, raised several monuments at Sarnath, one of which is the Dharmarajika stupa dating as early as 260 BCE.³² The other monument, now present in the Archaeological Museum of Sarnath, is the Asokan Lion-Capital that has also been adopted as the national emblem of India. The presence of this monolithic pillar and the discovery of the ancient ruins in Sarnath indicate that a monastery was already established during Asoka's time. The construction of the Dhamekh stupa is also credited to the Mauryan emperor.³³ Since Asoka's time, Buddhist patrons visited the site and built monasteries, temples, and stupas.³⁴

Faxian, one of the earliest Chinese pilgrims, visited India during the reign of the Gupta emperor in the fifth century, and his memoirs are contained in the text *A Record of Buddhist Kingdoms*, which was initially translated by James Legge in 1886.³⁵ Although most scholarly attention has been given to Bodhgaya, Sarnath was one of the sites that Faxian had visited. He mentions visiting the deer park where the first sermon was

³¹ Elizabeth Cook, *Holy Places of the Buddha*, vol. 9, Crystal Mirror Series (United States of America: Dharma Publishing, 1994), 65.

³² The Dharmarajika stupa was taken down in the 18th century, who submerged the relics found within the stupa into the Ganges. See Rana PB Singh, *Where the Buddha Walked: A companion to the Buddhist Places of India* (Indica Books, 2003), 129.

³³ Braj Ranjan Mani, *Sarnath: Archaeology, Art & Architecture* (Director General, Archaeological Survey of India, 2006), 16.

³⁴ Singh, *Where the Buddha Walked*, 130.

³⁵ John E Wills, "Journeys Mostly to the West: Chinese Perspectives on Travel Writing," *huntington library quarterly* 70, no. 1 (2007): 195.

delivered, and four stupas and two monastic centers where Buddhist monks lived at the time.³⁶

In the seventh century, Xuanzang, another important Chinese pilgrim, marveled at Asoka's pillar, and exclaimed that "it was so polished that it constantly reflected the [Dharmarajika] stupa's statue of the Buddha."³⁷ He also describes several stupas built where the previous Buddhas had walked and sat in meditation. While Faxian only witnessed two monasteries at Sarnath, Xuanzang records seeing thirty monasteries around the Deer Park. Furthermore, he noted that there were a large number of Saivite ascetics and temples that were prominent in Varanasi, and that most did not follow the Dharma or Buddhist teachings.³⁸

The inscriptions found at Sarnath indicate that Buddhism flourished there until the end of the twelfth century when the Turkish Muslims attacked the site and destroyed the monasteries. Again, in 1793, Jagat Singh, the chief at the court of King Chet Singh in Varanasi, ordered the destruction of the Dharmarajika stupa to build a market using the materials from the site.³⁹ The site was mainly abandoned from then until several archaeological excavations took place in the 19th century; from December 1834 to January 1836, Alexander Cunningham and his team focused on excavation projects in relation to the Dhamekh, Dharmarajika and Chaukhandi stupas. Since then numerous archeologists did excavation work at Sarnath. In 1852, Major Kitoe and his team

³⁶ Mani, *Sarnath: Archaeology, Art & Architecture*, 16.

³⁷ Singh, *Where the Buddha Walked*, 130.

³⁸ Cook, *Holy Places of the Buddha*, 9: 67. He primarily noticed Hindu activity at the site.

³⁹ Anuradha Singh, "Development of Buddhist Religion and Sarnath (With Special Reference To Archaeological Evidences)," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Social Science Invention* 2, no. 11 (November 2013): 1.

uncovered Monastery V, as labeled in the modern Excavated Archaeological Site, which consisted of twenty-eight separate apartments, votive *stupas*, a hospital, and shrines surrounding the Dhamekh stupa.⁴⁰ From 1904-1905, F.O Kitoe discovered the Main Shrine, known as Mulagandhikuti Vihara (ancient), the Asokan pillar with its capital, and various other sculptures and inscriptions. The later excavations revealed more monasteries and were conducted by Sir John Marshall, H. Hargreaves, and Daya Ram Sahani, which lasted until 1922.⁴¹ The present-day Mulagandha Kuti Vihara was inspired by the ancient shrine, and it is one of the most popular sites in Sarnath today.⁴²

Early Pilgrimage and Restoration at Bodhgaya

Emperor Asoka has been credited for constructing the first temple at Bodhgaya in 260 BCE.⁴³ Then, the Kushana rulers restored the tree shrine at the site and built a towered temple. In 388 CE, King Megha Varna built a monastery at Bodhgaya. According to the travel accounts of Faxian, at this time, Bodhgaya was an active pilgrim destination for Chinese, and it was surrounded by shrines built by devotees from different parts of India and Ceylon (Sri Lanka).⁴⁴

⁴⁰ Mani, *Sarnath: Archaeology, Art & Architecture*, 32.

⁴¹ Mani, *Sarnath: Archaeology, Art & Architecture*, 32-33.

⁴² In Sanskrit and Pali, *mula* means “root,” and *gandha* translates as “odor,” “smell,” or “fragrance.” *Kuti* refers to simple living quarters for monks, and they are typically built in a traditional Southeast Asian style. The word *kuti* may also refer to a monk’s room in a larger building. *Vihara*, lit. “abode,” is typically translated as “monastery.” According to John S. Strong (1977: 394) *gandhakuti* refers to “a perfumed chamber... a place of the Buddha.” He also states that the term refers to the fragrant offerings, such as flowers, usually found at the Buddha’s abode. For a critical study on *gandhakuti*, its meaning and usage, see John S Strong, “Gandhakuti”: The Perfumed Chamber of the Buddha,” *History of Religions* 16, no. 4 (1977). Also refer to Robert E Buswell Jr and Donald S Lopez Jr, *The Princeton Dictionary of Buddhism* (United States of America: Princeton University Press, 2013).

⁴³ There is some speculation about the origins of the temple as it has been modified and restored many times. For more information, see Alan Trevithick, “British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots, and Burmese Buddhists: The Mahabodhi Temple at Bodh Gaya, 1811–1877,” *Modern Asian Studies* 33, no. 3 (1999).

⁴⁴ Sarah Searcy, “Tourism, Pilgrimage and Development in Bodhgaya, Bihar India” (Master’s Thesis, East Carolina University, 2012), 16.

When Faxian visited India in the fifth century, he detailed Asoka's deeds and the veneration of Buddhist relics and images he came across during his travels.⁴⁵ He also recorded the presence of the sacred *pipal* tree, a stone (presumably the *vajrasana* or the 'diamond throne'), and wrote that "at the spot [where the Buddha attained enlightenment] they have raised a tower," which is the earliest reference to a structural temple.⁴⁶ Furthermore, Faxian noted that a pagoda was built on all the four important sites related to the life of the Buddha.⁴⁷ Xuanzang also recorded the presence of the Temple and the Bodhi tree with walls around it:

To the east of the *Bodhi* tree there is a *vihara* [monastery] about 160 or 170 feet high... the building is of... [bricks] covered with chunam [lime]; all the niches in the different stories hold golden figures. The sides of the building are covered with wonderful ornamental work, in one place figures of stringed pearls, in another figures of heavenly Rishis... To the right and left of the outside gate are niche-like chambers; in the left is a figure of Avalokitesvara Bodhisattva, and in the right a figure of Maitreya Bodhisattva. They are made of white silver, and are about ten feet high.⁴⁸

It seems that Bodhgaya has always been an important space for international pilgrimage.

In the seventh century, Bodhgaya was visited by Buddhists from Ceylon, Korea, and parts of Central Asia. The Sinhalese patrons are specially identified as key figures in the construction of major Buddhist structures at the site.⁴⁹ However, Xuanzang's travel accounts reveal that Buddhism was weakening in the face of religious competition.

⁴⁵ Tansen Sen, *Buddhism, Diplomacy, and Trade: The Realignment of Sino-Indian Relations, 600-1400* (University of Hawaii Press, 2003), 60.

⁴⁶ John Guy, "The Mahābodhi Temple: Pilgrim Souvenirs of Buddhist India," *The Burlington Magazine* (1991): 358-59.

⁴⁷ These sites are identified as Lumbini in Nepal, Bodhgaya, Sarnath, and Kusinagar. For more details, see Ministry of Tourism & Culture State of Bihar, "Information Dossier for Nomination of Mahabodhi Temple Complex, Bodhgaya," ed. Department of Tourism (UNESCO, 2002).

⁴⁸ Guy, "The Mahābodhi Temple," 359.

⁴⁹ Trevithick, "British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots," 636.

[Xuanzang] found numerous monastic centers in the area from the Sindh east to the Gangetic Plain... [but] the religion was already losing ground in the south and the northwest... at the same time that Sankara was revitalizing Advaita Vedanta. Hindu temples were being built, but no new Buddhist ones... Many monasteries were already deserted.⁵⁰

Additionally, it became harder for the Buddhist community to compete with the emerging *bhakti* (devotional love to a personal god) movement, which was viewed as a “friendlier alternative” to Buddhist monasticism.⁵¹

In the eleventh century, two Burmese missions were sent to Bodhgaya in attempts to restore the temple and several Buddhist structures.⁵² However, after the expansion of the Muslim rulers by the twelfth and thirteenth century, the site was mostly deserted and left in ruin. While the extent of the role of the Muslim invasion and decline of Buddhism in India is questioned,⁵³ it is clear that the Mahabodhi Temple was significantly damaged and neglected for a long time. In fact, when Dharmasvamin, a Tibetan pilgrim, arrived in 1243 AD, he noticed that there were only four monks in the local monastery.⁵⁴ He also found that the temple was in disrepair and that there was an image of Siva (a Hindu deity) on the door, which he assumed was a protective deity, “a guardian against the intrusion of

⁵⁰ Richard H. Robinson and Willard L. Johnson, *The Buddhist Religion: A Historical Introduction*, 4 ed. (Cincinnati: Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1997), 135.

⁵¹ Ian Copland, "Managing Religion in Colonial India: The British Raj and the Bodh Gaya Temple Dispute," *J. Church & St.* 46 (2004): 529.

⁵² The Burmese missions have played an important role in the restoration of many Buddhist sites, but the details of their earlier missions are beyond the scope of this study. The missions are also identified as important religious, economic, and nationalist movements by the Burmese government. For information, see Janice Stargardt, "Burma's Economic and Diplomatic Relations with India and China from Early Medieval Sources," *Journal of the Economic and Social History of the Orient/Journal de l'histoire economique et sociale de l'Orient* (1971).

⁵³ For more information about the theories and factors regarding the decline of Buddhism in India, see Frederick M Asher, "Bodh Gaya: Monumental Legacy," *New Delhi: Oxford University* (2008).

⁵⁴ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 25.

non-Buddhists.”⁵⁵ This indicates that there was some Hindu activity at the site, and the assimilation, rather than destruction, of Buddhist symbols, was already present at the temple.

In 1590 AD, a Hindu Saivite ascetic named Gosain Ghamandi Giri, and his followers from the Giri or Mountain Sect settled in the area and occupied the temple complex.⁵⁶ However, as Asher states, this was probably not a “forced take-over of the temple by the Saivas.”⁵⁷ He states that the site was most likely abandoned by the sixteenth century, and very few Buddhists may have been visiting the temple at the time. The site came under the protection of the Saiva Mahant or spiritual leader of that particular Saivite sect in Bodhgaya, and eventually acquired a lot of territory, becoming a *zamindar* or landowner of sorts.⁵⁸ The Mahants held great regional influence and made Bodhgaya their home and headquarters for over four hundred years.⁵⁹ The legitimacy of the Giri sect at the site benefited from the “powerful repertoire of myths that linked the two neighboring holy sites Gaya and Buddha Gaya to a complex Hindu cosmology.”⁶⁰ In fact, the site of Bodhgaya has been an important site for Vaisnavas (Visnu-centered groups) as well. In

⁵⁵ Trevithick (1999: 636) makes an important remark that the Tibetan Pilgrim’s confusion points to “a generic, historical relationship between Hinduism and Buddhism and, to the potential for conflict to arise out of differential interpretations of commonly held symbolic properties.” Indeed, these matters were further complicated when a Hindu Saivite settled in the region. See Trevithick, “British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots,” 636.

⁵⁶ Huber, *The Holy Land Reborn*, 181.

⁵⁷ Frederick M Asher, “The Bodhgaya Temple: Whose Structure Is It?,” *Religion and the Arts* 8, no. 1 (2004): 67.

⁵⁸ The Giri sect can be traced back to the Dasanami (‘ten names’) Order, which was a federation of Hindu mendicants that were divided into ten lineages and ultimately to the eighth-century philosopher of Advaita Vedanta, Sankara. As argued by Geary (2013: 367), “many of the Gosains, like the Giri sect in Bodh Gaya, became settled religious communities who derived wealth not as traders but through extensive land holdings as *zamindars*.” For a critical examination of the Mahants of Bodhgaya or the Bodhgaya Math, see Geary (2009, 2012, 2013, 2017).

⁵⁹ Geary, “Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism,” 28.

⁶⁰ Tapati Guha-Thakurta, *Monuments, Objects, Histories: Institutions of Art in Colonial and Post-Colonial India* (Columbia University Press, 2004), 282.

the *Gaya Mahatmaya* (from around the eleventh century), as Abhishek S. Amar argues, there is an attempt to assign new meanings to the Bodhi tree at Bodhgaya:

After bowing to dharma and Dharmesvara, he (the pilgrim) should bow to the Mahabodhi tree (*Mahabodhitaru*), (with this mantra), “reverence to the tree whose leaves tremble, where Visnu stands eternally, to the truth of awakening (*bodhitattvaya*), to sacrifice, and to the *Asvattha* tree. You are the eleventh of eleven, and also the eighth of eight; you are the Narayana of the gods, you are the Pipala, the king of trees. Since Narayana stands in you for all time, *Asvattha* king of trees, you are perpetually auspicious among trees; you are fortunate; you are the destroyer of bad dreams. I revere Hari, the divine wielder of the conch, discus and mace, in the form of *Asvattha*, the Lotus Eyed, having the shape of a branch (*sakharupadhara*).⁶¹

Among the Hindus at Bodhgaya then, the ruins of the Temple and its surrounding objects became monuments to “Buddha Dev,” an incarnation of Lord Visnu.⁶²

The Hindu Saivite organization expanded over the years and maintained its control of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex. The Burmese made repeated visits to the site between 1795-1867 with the intent of restoring the temple and strengthening their government’s political esteem.⁶³ In the early nineteenth century, Major-General Sir Alexander Cunningham (1814-1893) or the “father of Indian archaeology” requested a detailed investigation of Buddhist remains, and with the support of Viceroy Lord Canning, the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) was established.⁶⁴ The earlier surveys reveal the assimilation of Buddhist imagery into Hinduism. For instance, during the

⁶¹ As Amar argues, the assertions about Visnu’s presence at the Bodhi tree and its significance as a sacred site among Vaisnavas, is part of a historical process that attempted to claim that the Buddha was one of Visnu’s avataras (incarnations). For more information, see Abhishek S Amar, "Buddhist Responses to Brāhmaṇa Challenges in Medieval India: Bodhgayā and Gayā," *Journal of the Royal Asiatic Society* 22, no. 1 (2012): 169-70.

⁶² Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 28.

⁶³ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 32.

⁶⁴ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 29.

survey of the towns of Gaya and Bodhgaya, Major Mead, who was under Cunningham's direction, reported that Buddhist objects like the stupas were seen as "ready-made *lingam*[s]." ⁶⁵ The British imperial government, however, was not always interested in the preservation of artifacts, antiquities, or ancient monuments during the early surveys by Cunningham and his assistants. ⁶⁶ The preservation of ancient ruins, like the Mahabodhi Temple, were considered to be important at a later time. Trevithick remarks that the significance of this restoration project by the British government cannot be attributed to a "shift in archaeological policy, but [it] was triggered by the intervention of a Burmese mission charged by King Mindon in 1874." ⁶⁷

By the eighteenth century, the Burmese kings were interested in the sacred Buddhist geography, which was in direct conflict with the British constructions of knowledge about India's 'lost' religion. ⁶⁸ In 1864, the British Government of India had received communication from the king of Burma requesting to send a mission to Bodhgaya. However, in addition to the government officials, the Mahant had to approve of the Burmese mission. Approval was eventually granted, but certain limitations applied:

Under the tree there are altars and gods belonging to the Hindoo religion where Hindu rajahs and rich men resort to and offer Pindas and perform sacrificial ceremonies. Near the tree and within the enclosure round it there is at present a place of worship of the Hindoos. I therefore submit that if anything other than that allowed by the Hindus be offered to the tree, the Hindus will have objection to it. If the King of Burmah send anything to be offered to the tree that is prescribed by the Hindoo religion, there will be no objection to it. (FDPB, May 1878, Nos 10–28) ⁶⁹

⁶⁵ Trevithick, "British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots," 646.

⁶⁶ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 31.

⁶⁷ Trevithick, "British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots," 684.

⁶⁸ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 31.

⁶⁹ Trevithick, "British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots," 650.

The Mahant did not have any objections with the Burmese missions, as long as the Burmese monks did not interfere with Hindu religious rites, especially near the Bodhi tree, and they did not displace any of the Hindu images at the site. Furthermore, the Giris did not sell any land to the Burmese but allowed them to lease a piece of their land for the construction of their rest-house.⁷⁰ Once the Burmese began their restoration work in 1877, the Government of Bengal sent Rajendralala Mitra of the ASI to report on “the authenticity of the Burmese restorations efforts.”⁷¹ He remarked that the Burmese had “no systematic or traditional plan... They are ignorant of the true history of their faith and perfectly innocent of archaeology and history, and the mischief they have done by their misdirected zeal has been serious... and nothing of ancient times can now be traced on the area they have worked upon (FDPB, Feb. 1878, Nos 129–51).”⁷²

The Burmese were eventually evicted, and the government of India decided to take up the task of restoring the Mahabodhi Temple with the ‘right’ archaeological techniques.⁷³ In 1880, the Lt. Governor of Bengal, Sir Ashley Eden, appointed Alexander and his assistant to the task of restoring the temple, based on a stone model found at the site. These restorations took four years, and cost around 200,000 rupees.⁷⁴ The British Government of India had taken on more responsibility for the maintenance of the site and placed the building and its grounds under government supervision.⁷⁵ It should be noted

⁷⁰ Trevithick, "British Archaeologists, Hindu Abbots," 650.

⁷¹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 32.

⁷² Trevithick (1999: 651- 652) notes that the ‘Buddhism’ constructed by the British was text-based, and it had little to do with the living practice of Burmese Buddhism. Moreover, he states that Mitra’s “archaeological horror,” was not representative of the Mahant’s or the Hindu pilgrims’ experiences with the Burmese.

⁷³ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 33.

⁷⁴ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 33.

⁷⁵ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 34.

here that, at the time, the government of India was not interested in promoting Buddhism. Indeed, Copland states that most of the officials were hoping that the Mahabodhi Temple would eventually cease to be a living religious site and be converted to a 'secular' monument known for its archaeological and historical significance.⁷⁶ However, with the arrival of Anagarika Dharmapala and other Buddhist revivalists, these hopes would remain just that.

The Hindu-Buddhist Dispute, Anagarika Dharmapala and the Maha Bodhi Society

Bodhgaya, widely known as the site of the Buddha's enlightenment, has long been a topic of interest; this fascination ranges from the early accounts of Chinese pilgrims Faxian and Xuanzang, to Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, and the Government of India. According to Geary, "given the long historical breadth and scope of inter-Asian influence at Bodh Gaya over the centuries, it is tempting to discern that Bodh Gaya has always been a place of global connection and transnational influence."⁷⁷ Geary also remarks that Bodhgaya's image as "the navel of the earth and the geographic centre of the Buddhist world... has long existed in the spiritual itineraries and religious imagination of Buddhists prior to the history of the nation-states."⁷⁸ As Kinnard states, however, "Bodhgaya is not, and has never been, *only* a Buddhist site."⁷⁹ Bodhgaya is a multivalent and contested location, since it attracts travelers that view "the same site through different spiritual lenses."⁸⁰ In order to better understand the dynamics of religious conflict between the

⁷⁶ Copland, "Managing Religion in Colonial India," 533.

⁷⁷ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 10.

⁷⁸ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 10.

⁷⁹ Jacob N Kinnard, "When Is The Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and Its Buddha Image," *Journal of the American Academy of Religion* (1998): 817.

⁸⁰ See Marion I Bowman, "Ancient Avalon, New Jerusalem, Heart Chakra of Planet Earth: The Local and the Global in Glastonbury," *Numen* 52, no. 2 (2005): 177.

Mahant and Anagarika Dharmapala detailed later in the chapter, the assimilation of the Buddha into the Hindu tradition warrants some discussion.

The Buddha's philosophical views and teachings challenged many of the orthodox Hindu institutions and doctrines, such as the high regard for the Vedas (sacred scriptures), metaphysical speculations about the self (*atman*) and absolute reality (*Brahman*), Hindu deities, and the class system.⁸¹ As a result, in the earlier normative Hindu texts, there were instances when the Buddhists were referred to as "demons" or "devils." Despite the opposition, however, Buddhist thought was eventually incorporated into some of the most sacred Hindu texts, such as the *Bhagavad Gita*.⁸² However, the assimilation of Buddhist ideas and imagery, as the Indian historian P.V. Kane argues, "is not a consequence of Hindu tolerance, nor reflective of a Hindu proclivity for philosophical syncretism."⁸³ He notes that the rise of institutional Buddhism's political presence since the third century B.C.E. and the days of Asoka left the Hindu communities with little choice but to accept Buddhist ideas on the one hand, but also "to undermine, condemn, or chastise rival Buddhists and their institutional communities" on the other.⁸⁴ In the eighth century, "the Buddha was incorporated and subordinated" within the Vaisnava tradition as one of the

⁸¹ John Clifford Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu: religious Transformation, Politics, and Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2004), 9-10.

⁸² Holt (2004: 11) remarks that "Buddhistic notions (concentrated meditation, selfless asceticism, and the ethicization of karma, etc.) were eventually incorporated, in elegant and philosophically precise language, within the poetic syntheses of the *Bhagavad Gita*, perhaps the most highly revered of all Hindu sacred texts." He states that the conversation between Krsna and Arjuna regarding detachment from the fruit of one's actions, and Krsna's emphasis on the realization of nirvana or enlightenment "as a means and goal of the disciplined spiritual path" (372) resonates with Buddhist views and terminology. For a comprehensive study on the relationship between Buddhist philosophy and the *Bhagavad Gita*, see Kashi Nath Upadhyaya, *Early Buddhism and the Bhagavadgita* (Delhi, India: Motilal Banarsidass Publishers, 1971).

⁸³ Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 11.

⁸⁴ Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 12.

avatars of lord Visnu.⁸⁵ The integration of the Buddha's image into Hinduism allowed for an inclusion of the Buddha to some extent, but unlike some of Visnu's other avatars, the Buddha was not depicted as a heroic figure. The *Visnu Purana* details the Buddha avatara as "a necessary evil," required to mislead the wicked away from the truth.⁸⁶ As I will show throughout this chapter, the Buddha within the Hindu context took a dramatic turn during the political and nationalist movement for India's independence. Taking into account the Hindu-Buddhist dispute that predates Bodhgaya's reclamation as a Buddhist site, the marketing of Bodhgaya (and Bihar) must be understood within its historical, cultural, and political context.

Anagarika Dharmapala,⁸⁷ also known as the 'revivalist of Buddhism,' was an advocate of Sinhalese independence from the British colonial rule, and the founder of the Maha Bodhi Society.⁸⁸ Dharmapala was an important figure for the reclamation projects at both Bodhgaya and Sarnath, which he passionately pursued during the late nineteenth and early twentieth century.⁸⁹

⁸⁵ Holt states (2004: 24) that Visnu was also transformed, incorporated and subordinated within Sinhalese Buddhism as the guardian deity of Sri Lanka and as a bodhisattva or future Buddha (a being on the path to enlightenment). Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 12.

⁸⁶ This depiction of the Buddha as a deceitful teacher will later play into the religious conflict between Dharmapala and the Giris at the Mahabodhi Temple Complex. Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 18.

⁸⁷ His birth name was Don David Hewavitarne, but I will be referring to him with the title he took on in 1889, which was Anagarika Dharmapala. According to Donald S. Lopez (2002: 54), Dharmapala (meaning "protector of Dharma") "established a new role for Buddhist laypeople, creating the category of the 'anagarika' or wanderer." In this new role, Dharmapala could partake in activities traditionally for monks (studying texts and meditation), and he could also socially engage with the world as a layperson.

⁸⁸ When I visited the Anagarika Dharmapala Museum in Sarnath, the caretaker of the museum handed me a book entitled: *Anagarika Dharmapa: The Revivalist of Buddhism*, authored by the venerable Dr. Bhikshu Dharmarakshita and published by the Maha Bodhi Society of India.

⁸⁹ Goldberg, "Buddhists Without Borders," 112.

In 1864, Anagarika Dharmapala was born Don David Hewavitarne to a wealthy, English-speaking Buddhist family in Colombo.⁹⁰ He was also part of the Theosophical Society since he was adopted by Madame Helena Petrona Blavatsky and Colonel Henry Steel Olcott at the age of sixteen.⁹¹ When Dharmapala accompanied Henry Olcott on a trip to Japan, he fell ill and read a popular text written by Sir Edwin Arnold, *The Light of Asia*, first published in London in 1879. Sir Edwin Arnold is perhaps the first person to contribute to the modern reinvention of Buddhism as it relates to Bodhgaya, since he was the first to question the Saivite control of the temple. He also equated Bodhgaya to sort of a Mecca for the Buddhists and wished to unite all Buddhists of Asia. In one of his articles in the *London Daily Telegraph*, he wrote:

the spot dear, divine, and precious beyond every other place on earth, to all four hundred million Buddhists in China, Japan, Mongolia, Assam, Cambodia, Burma... Ceylon... If you walked in that spot which all these scores of millions of our race love so well you would observe the shame and grief... stones carved with Buddha's images... used as weights in the levers for drawing water... Asokan pillars, the most ancient relics of the site – indeed, "The most antique memorials of all India," which graced the temple pavement, are now used as posts of the Mahant's kitchen.⁹²

Dharmapala was inspired by Edwin Arnold's writings, and he remarked:

The idea of restoring the Buddhist Jerusalem into Buddhist hands originated with Sir Edwin Arnold after having visited the sacred spot in 1886. It was he who gave me the impulse to visit the shrine, and since

⁹⁰ Kinnard, "When Is The Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and Its Buddha Image," 820.

⁹¹ The Theosophical Society was established in 1875 by Colonel Henry Steel Olcott and Helena Blavatsky. Olcott and Blavatsky were the first Americans to publicly convert to Buddhism, and as Gananath Obeyesekere (1991: 227) concedes, "the Buddhist takeover of Western ideas of Buddhism initially started by Olcott." Stephen Prothero (1995: 286) notes that Olcott was an influential figure and initially, Dharmapala agreed with many theosophical elements of Olcott's Buddhism, but he eventually rejected his theosophy as "a bastard offspring of the Buddha's pure Dharma." For more details on Dharmapala's life, Colonel Henry Steel Olcott, and the Theosophical Society, see Gananath Obeyesekere (1991), Stephen Prothero (1995), Alan Trevithick (2006) and Steven Kemper (2015).

⁹² Steven Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World* (University of Chicago Press, 2015), 193.

1891 I have done all I could to make the Buddhists of all lands interested in the scheme of restoration.⁹³

In January 1891, Anagarika Dharmapala and his friend, Kozen Gunaratana (a Japanese Shingon priest), visited Isipatana (Sarnath) and Bodhgaya.⁹⁴ During his first visit to the Mahabodhi Temple, he imagined that the site would simply be handed over to the Buddhists, and “a united Buddhist world would naturally take shape around the site.”⁹⁵ However, he soon came to realize the extent to which the Giris had taken over the Mahabodhi temple, and Dharmapala and Kozen decided to stay at Bodhgaya for a few days until some Buddhists came to take charge of the place.⁹⁶ Dharmapala acquired the keys to the rest-house constructed by the Burmese during their missions in 1874. He decided to write a series of letters to various Buddhist countries to bring attention to Bodhgaya and to raise some funds for purchasing the Temple back from the Mahant.⁹⁷ In 1889, Don David Hewavitarne made the decision to change his name, in an attempt to reaffirm his image as the revivalist of Buddhism, to Anagarika Dharmapala, meaning “homeless protector of the Dharma.”⁹⁸

Once four Buddhist monks arrived and settled at the Burmese rest-house, Dharmapala returned to Ceylon and established the Maha Bodhi Society in May 1891, with the High Priest of Ceylon, Venerable Weligama Sumangala, as President, Henry

⁹³ Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 59.

⁹⁴ K.S. Sumedha, *Anagarika Dharmapala: The Lion of Lanka, Second Asoka in India: Saga of a Great National Hero, Social Reformer, and Buddhist Revivalist in the Modern Era* (Maha Bodhi Society, 2006), 83.

⁹⁵ Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World*, 241. Dharmapala’s knowledge about Bodhgaya was mostly text-based, and he was unaware of the extent to which the Saivite mahants controlled the site. Moreover, Kemper (2015:223) argues that Dharmapala’s interest in Bodhgaya as a “Buddhist Mecca was highly imagined [due to] his hopes for a united Buddhist world.”

⁹⁶ Sumedha, *Anagarika Dharmapala: The Lion of Lanka*, 83.

⁹⁷ Sumedha, *Anagarika Dharmapala: The Lion of Lanka*, 84.

⁹⁸ Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 216.

Steel Olcott as Director and Dharmapala as General Secretary. The main goal of the organization was to “rescue, restore and re-establish as the religious centre of his movement, the holy place of Buddha Gaya.”⁹⁹ Additionally, Dharmapala hoped that the formation of this society would help “bind the Buddhist nations together... [and] will make them members of one spiritual family.”¹⁰⁰ The society made an offer to the British government to acquire the temple from the Mahant and sell it to the Buddhists, but the government was uninterested. Dharmapala wished to reclaim the site via direct negotiations with the Giris but did not have much success there either. He hoped to find another way to bring international attention to the site of Bodhgaya, which would convince the Government of India to intervene.

Dharmapala established the Mahabodhi Society Journal (MSJ) in May 1892, which allowed him to portray Bodhgaya’s significance as part of a global pilgrimage circuit and to anchor the tradition’s “symbolic geography in a central place.”¹⁰¹ A key turning point in Dharmapala’s reclamation efforts, as Trevithick argues, was the 1893 World Parliament of Religions in Chicago.¹⁰² During his speech, Dharmapala identified himself as the self-appointed spokesperson of “four hundred and seventy-five million of [sic] Buddhists,” and presented his vision of a unified Asia civilized under the umbrella of Buddhism, just as India was during King Asoka’s reign.¹⁰³ He compared the 1893

⁹⁹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 40.

¹⁰⁰ Maria Moritz, "'The Empire of Righteousness:' Anagarika Dharmapala and His Vision of Buddhist Asianism (c. 1900)," In *Asianisms: Regionalist Interactions and Asian Integration*, ed. Marc Frey and Nicola Spakowski (Singapore: National University of Singapore Press, 2015), 30.

¹⁰¹ Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World*, 192.; Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 41.

¹⁰² Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 95.

¹⁰³ Maria Moritz (2015: 29) argues that Dharmapala presented Buddhism as an antidote to the Western civilization’s basic challenges: modernity, religious pluralism, nihilism, environmental destruction, etc. See Moritz, "The Empire of Righteousness."

World Parliament of Religions to a similar event accomplished by Indian Buddhists led by the Buddhist king Asoka more than twenty centuries ago.¹⁰⁴ Dharmapala's rendition of the supposed superiority of Eastern spirituality was in some ways similar to a Hindu representative named Swami Vivekananda, who claimed: "Asia should spiritualize the overly materialistic West."¹⁰⁵ Most of the audience viewed them as "the most impressive figures of the Parliament" due to their fluency in English and their persuasive rhetorical skills as they presented their own versions of South Asia.¹⁰⁶ According to Peter van der Veer, Vivekananda's interpretation of Hindu spirituality at the 1893 event was a catalyst for the development of Hindu nationalism and spirituality.¹⁰⁷

Both figures were promoting "global spirituality," but their philosophies varied considerably, especially their views on the relationship between Buddhism and Hinduism. Dharmapala aimed to establish a pan-Asian Buddhist world and to open up the most important sites related to early Buddhism in India: Bodhgaya and Sarnath.¹⁰⁸ During the event, he attempted to portray Buddhism as "non-threatening to the Hindus ... [while] Vivekananda spoke of 'The Buddha providing the heart of Hindu religion while the Brahmin provided its head.'"¹⁰⁹ By calling the Buddha a great Hindu reformer, teacher, and a rationalist thinker, the Buddha's new image perfectly blended with Vivekananda's version of a universalistic Hinduism.¹¹⁰ This new interpretation of the Buddha and

¹⁰⁴ John S. Harding, *Mahayana Phoenix: Japan's Buddhists at the 1893 Worlds Parliament of Religions* (New York: Peter Lang Publishing, Inc., 2008), 13.

¹⁰⁵ Moritz, "The Empire of Righteousness," 27.

¹⁰⁶ Harding, *Mahayana Phoenix*, 13-14.

¹⁰⁷ Peter Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia: The Spiritual and the Secular in China and India* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2013), 179.

¹⁰⁸ Van der Veer, *The Modern Spirit of Asia*, 86.

¹⁰⁹ Sarath Amunugama, "A Sinhala Buddhist "Babu": Anagarika Dharmapala (1864-1933) and the Bengal connection," *Social Science Information* 30, no. 3 (1991): 577.

¹¹⁰ Eventually, during India's independence movement in the mid-twentieth century, Vivekananda's representation of the Buddha was adopted. See Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 20-21.

contrasting views regarding Sinhalese Buddhism divided the two figures, and their debates can be witnessed via their lectures and writings from early twentieth century.¹¹¹

After he attended the World Parliament of Religions, Dharmapala traveled through Japan, China, and Thailand to present a few more lectures in hopes that the other Buddhist countries would be interested in aiding him on his mission to restore Bodhgaya. He was especially interested in getting the Japanese Buddhists involved. He was not able to gain full financial support from the Japanese figures, but he was able to make a few allies along the way. As Trevithick argues, Dharmapala's participation at the parliament elevated his status as an international figure and allowed him to be more financially independent.¹¹² During his travels, he met Mary Foster in Honolulu who was so impressed by Dharmapala's convictions that she donated substantial funds to the Maha Bodhi Society, its orphanages, schools, and seminaries in India and Ceylon.¹¹³

The tensions were already heightened between Dharmapala and the Giris, but it was the installation of a seven-hundred-year-old Amitabha Buddha statue, gifted to him by Kozen's family, on February 25, 1895, which set in a motion a series of legal battles known as the "Great Case."¹¹⁴ This was also an important event that can be seen "as the culmination of centuries of Hindu-Buddhist relations at Bodhgaya... [and] that would

¹¹¹ As Trevithick notes, Vivekananda believed that both traditions were from the "same tree," but the branch of Buddhism had deteriorated. Moreover, he stated that Sinhalese Buddhists were crippled by their own degenerate tradition since they were "all much Europeanized – even Mr. D. [Dharmapala] and his father had European names, which they have since changed." See Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 169.

¹¹² Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 98.

¹¹³ Mary Foster is recognized as one of Dharmapala's greatest benefactresses and due to her financial support, many temples, monasteries, schools, and hospitals have been set up in India and Sri Lanka. See Sumedha, *Anagarika Dharmapala: The Lion of Lanka*, 86.

¹¹⁴ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 43.

radically shape the future of Buddhism in India and in the world at large.”¹¹⁵ After the installation of the image on the altar, the Mahant’s men confronted Dharmapala and violently snatched the image and placed it on the temple lawn.¹¹⁶ In his discussion of this event, Kinnard argues that this act of enshrining the Buddhist image on the altar was not a benign attempt at restoring a sacred site. Rather, he suggests that this was an “open act of aggression aimed at Hinduism in general and at the Bodhgaya Mahant in particular.”¹¹⁷

The British government was now in a hard place, as it had to deal with the management of sacred space and religious conflict. While the government wished to maintain neutrality and keep out of religious matters, there seemed to be an agreement that the property was owned by the Mahant. The British government was also hesitant about handing over the property to an extra-national organization. Despite some of the claims that Dharmapala made against the Giris and their treatment of the Buddhist images, there was minimal evidence to support his statements. Moreover, there was little support from other Buddhist groups who had shared the space with the Hindus for centuries.¹¹⁸

During the trials that arose from this conflict when the dispute moved to the courts, Dharmapala was questioned about many of the articles either written by him or printed by the Mahabodhi Society Journal. Indeed, Dharmapala was interrogated about

¹¹⁵ Kinnard, "When Is The Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and Its Buddha Image," 819.

¹¹⁶ Kinnard, "When Is The Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and Its Buddha Image," 819.

¹¹⁷ Kinnard, "When Is The Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and Its Buddha Image," 822.

¹¹⁸ Kinnard (1998: 822-825) notes that the Burmese Theravada Buddhists and the Mahayana Buddhists had an amicable relationship with the Mahant, and that besides the Sinhalese Buddhists who supported Dharmapala, not many Buddhists were concerned about the Giris.

his writings implying that the Mahant was a usurper of the Temple and that Dharmapala was attempting to raise funds to regain control of the site. Dharmapala admitted to his attempt at raising funds, but he stated that it was a part of his social reformation activities for the Maha Bodhi Society. He denied writing anything distasteful about the Mahant himself, but he did believe that the Buddha images were not treated respectfully. When asked about the reverence of the Buddha as an avatara of Visnu, he insisted that the Buddha was not worshipped in the same way as the other heroic incarnations, such as Krsna.¹¹⁹

Due to his unique upbringing and engagement with the Theosophical society, Dharmapala was aware of the text *Visnu Purana*, which portrays the Buddha as the “purveyor of false views,” and discusses some of the faults of the followers of the Buddha as neglecting basic rituals and duties prescribed for householders.¹²⁰ This view was declared during the Great Case trials. Gangadhar Shastri, a friend of Dharmapala’s and a Hindu from the Brahmin caste, was called on as a witness for prosecution. When asked to confirm why the Hindus did not worship Buddha, he responded:

...the enemies of the gods, the Rakshasas [demons], began to follow the Vedas, and as they did so, they acquired strength...began to destroy people. Then Vishnu, assuming the disguise of Buddha, ordered them not to believe in the Vedas and began to teach them false doctrine in order to confound them and protect the gods... Samnyasis originated with Sankara Acharya... at a time when the Buddhist religion was spread greatly over India. Sankara Acarya waged war against the Buddhists, each of whom

¹¹⁹ For details on the Bodhgaya Temple Case, See Anagarika Dharmapala, *The Budh-Gaya Temple Case: H. Dharmapala Versus Jaipal Gir and Others.* (Prosecution Under Sections 295, 296, 297, 143 & 506 of the Indian Penal Code) (Delhi, India: Buddhist World Press, 2016).

¹²⁰ Kinnard, "When Is The Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and Its Buddha Image," 831-32.

started a separate order, one of which is the Giri, represented at Bodh Gaya by the Mahanth and his disciples.¹²¹

Dharmapala was largely unaware of “the long history of Buddhist-Hindu interaction *on the ground* in northeast India, and in particular, the degree to which the iconography of the two traditions frequently overlapped and intermeshed.”¹²² Nonetheless, Dharmapala was unhappy that the site was being shared with the Hindus. During the course of the trial, he informed the Magistrate of Gaya that many other injustices had been performed against Buddhist images. In his complaint against the Mahant and his retainers, including Jaipal Gir and Hussain Baksh, Dharmapala stated a few other observations:

I also lay a charge about the disfigurement of the central image on the ground floor by paint having been put on the forehead and coloured cloth having been put over it... I had been on several previous occasions to the temple since 1891, and this had not been done before. On the contrary, it was so repellent to the Hindus to visit the place that I have seen eminent Hindus go there with their shoes on and making no bow... The disfigurement referred to causes great pain to every Buddhist, and constitutes an insult to our religion. I have seen a Brahmin priest now putting flowers on the head of the image. I noticed this was on the 25th instant [the same day the Buddhist image was placed on the altar]. Putting flowers thus is an insult to our religion.¹²³

This statement illustrates Dharmapala’s frustration regarding the veneration of a Buddhist image by Hindus. Influenced by his orientalist predecessors, Dharmapala was attempting to draw a symbolic boundary between the Buddhists and Hindus and

¹²¹ Shastri’s statement was read over in Hindi, cross-examined, and then admitted as correct by the judge. Dharmapala, *The Budh-Gaya Temple Case*, 90.

¹²² Kinnard (1998:832) notes that the early iconography of Visnu and the Buddha is almost identical, the footprints (*padas*) especially are nonanthropomorphic symbols for both, and the Buddha’s footprints have often been venerated by Hindus who believe that the footprints belong to Visnu. For a comprehensive discussion on Hindu/Buddhist iconography, see Jacob N Kinnard, "The Polyvalent Pādas of Viṣṇu and the Buddha," *History of Religions* 40, no. 1 (2000).

¹²³ Dharmapala, *The Budh-Gaya Temple Case*, 114.

demanded that the Buddha was not, and would never have been Visnu.¹²⁴ His mission was to restore Buddhist sites and purify Buddhism to its original state.¹²⁵ Unfortunately for him, the British government wished to maintain neutrality, and the results of the “Great Case” did not work in his favor. However, the case attracted attention from the Viceroy of India, Lord Curzon, who wished to place the temple within the *Ancient Monuments Preservation Act* of 1904.¹²⁶

Lord Curzon favored the Buddhist side of the debate, but could not find a way to devalue the Mahant’s claims of proprietorship. Eventually, a commission was formed under Lord Curzon to address the issue of religious authority over the sacred site. It was recommended that Government supervision was required and that a “supervisory board of five respectable gentlemen excluding non-Indian and Buddhists due to their sectarian influence, be established.”¹²⁷ Although the Mahant refused to the terms set by the commission, Dharmapala was able to obtain a piece of land for the construction of the Maha Bodhi Society Rest House.¹²⁸

In 1903, a new vision of Bodhgaya was introduced when a Japanese Pilgrim, Okakura Kakuzō, negotiated with the Mahant to grant him some land where a Japanese priest could stay until the arrival of more Japanese pilgrims.¹²⁹ Unlike Dharmapala, who was in strict opposition with the Mahant, Okakura believed in Hindu-Buddhist

¹²⁴ Kinnard, "When Is The Buddha Not the Buddha? The Hindu/Buddhist Battle over Bodhgayā and Its Buddha Image," 835.

¹²⁵ Kinnard (1988: 826) notes that the irony of placing a Japanese Buddhist image, instead of an Indian image of Sakyamuni Buddha, was lost on Dharmapala.

¹²⁶ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 44.

¹²⁷ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 44.

¹²⁸ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 45.

¹²⁹ Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 171.

cooperation and the “common origin” of the two traditions.¹³⁰ As Trevithick points out, Okakura was influenced by Swami Vivekananda, and viewed Buddhism and Hinduism as complementary traditions.¹³¹ As a result, the Mahant agreed to allow the construction of a new rest-house, but the government was worried that the present conflict at the site would be intensified with the arrival of a new foreign influence. The British authorities decided to intervene and reclaim the site based on its archaeological value.¹³²

In 1911, following the second partition of Bengal, Bodhgaya was situated in the newly created provincial government of Orissa and Bihar. There was a second attempt to place the Mahabodhi Temple under the *Ancient Monuments Act* of 1904, but not desiring to exacerbate conflicts regarding the management and proprietorship in Bodhgaya, the Commissioner of Patna excluded the site from the Act’s purveyance.¹³³ As a result, Dharmapala entered into a new set of negotiations with Indian politicians and realized that he would benefit from gaining support from other Hindus and nationalists. As part of his new strategy, Dharmapala reached out to Mahatma Gandhi, who responded that he could not help him at the time but he believed that a solution would come up “when India comes into her own.”¹³⁴ Although Dharmapala did not live to witness it, Gandhi’s prophetic statement became a reality only two years after India’s independence in 1949 when the *Bodhgaya Temple Act* was formulated by the Chief Minister of Bihar. In 1952,

¹³⁰ Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 169.

¹³¹ Okakura’s views fell somewhere in between Vivekananda’s interpretation of a universal Hinduism and Dharmapala’s pan-Asianism. He was aware of the differences between various Asian traditions, but he believed that they all stood in opposition to Western Civilization. In response to the threat of Western colonization around this time, the Japanese were embracing the “timeless sacrality of Asia” as an extension of its modernization movement. For a critical discussion on nationalism in East Asia, see Prasenjit Duara, “The Discourse of Civilization and Pan-Asianism,” *Journal of World History* (2001).

¹³² Geary, “Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism,” 46.

¹³³ Geary, “Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism,” 46-47.

¹³⁴ Trevithick, *The Revival of Buddhist Pilgrimage at Bodh Gaya*, 179.

the management of the Temple complex was turned over from the Mahant to a new Superintendent of the Mahabodhi Temple who, as was specified legally, was Hindu; the committee consisted of five Hindus and four Buddhists.¹³⁵ Under this management, Bodhgaya became completely accessible to the international Buddhist Community.¹³⁶

Anagarika Dharmapala's Contribution to Sarnath

As part of his mission to restore Buddhist sites in India, Dharmapala wished to bring back “the Ancient glory to Sarnath – the birth place of Buddhism.”¹³⁷ In 1916, he started negotiations with the authorities of the Archaeological Society of India (ASI), and he was able to obtain enough land from the Government of India (under British rule) to build Mulagandha Kuti Vihara. Via letters sent to the Government of Bengal, he was also able to make arrangements to enshrine bone-relics of the Buddha at the new temple.¹³⁸ In 1928, Dharmapala fell ill but continued to dedicate his time to Buddhist projects, specifically in Sarnath. He participated in the opening ceremony of Mulagandha Kuti Vihara on November 11th 1931.¹³⁹ That same day, as promised by the Government of India, the holy relics of the Buddha were presented to the Maha Bodhi Society by the Director General of Archaeology, Rai Bahadur Dayaram Sahni, at the Sarnath

¹³⁵ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 54.

¹³⁶ Molly Emma Aitkin, *Meeting the Buddha: On Pilgrimage in Buddhist India* (New York: Riverhead Books, 1995), 94.

¹³⁷ *History of the Mulagandha Kuty Vihara Sacred Relics and Wall Paintings at Isipatana: the First Preaching place of the Buddha*, (Sarnath, Varanasi: Mulagandha Kuty Vihara, Sarranam Printers), 58.

¹³⁸ The bone-relics were found in a small Buddhist chapel by Dharmarajika stupas in the ancient city of Taxila (modern-day Punjab, Pakistan) by Sir John Marshall in 1913-1914. *History of the Mulagandha Kuty Vihara Sacred Relics and Wall Paintings at Isipatana: the First Preaching place of the Buddha*, 58-64.

¹³⁹ *History of the Mulagandha Kuty Vihara Sacred Relics and Wall Paintings at Isipatana: the First Preaching place of the Buddha*, 17.

Archaeological Museum.¹⁴⁰ During Sahni’s speech, he mentioned that he was happy with the choice of the title *mulagandha* and *vihara* since “no ancient examples of *gandhakuti* have come down... on any of the Buddhist sites in India that have so far been explored, [and] that Sarnath did formerly possess a *Mulagandhakuti* is evident from inscriptions brought to light on the site.”¹⁴¹

The temple’s foundation was laid by a British nobleman, Sir Harcourt Butler, in 1922. After the Burmese temple, the Migaduwan Myanmar Temple (constructed in 1908), also known as the Sri Lankan temple (modern-day Mulagandha Kuti Vihara), is among the first modern Buddhist temples built in Sarnath. Dharmapala received most of the funds from his benefactress Mary Foster and received support from a few other patrons whose donations included land and money.¹⁴² The architectural features of the temple are distinct and speak to Dharmapala’s intentions of a universal Buddhism, which was widely influenced by Olcott’s vision.¹⁴³

During the inaugurations, representatives from almost every Buddhist country had attended the ceremony, and the interior frescoes were painted by a Japanese artist, named Kosetu Nosu, which were funded by an English Buddhist, B.L. Browton.¹⁴⁴ The frescoes, which include different episodes of the Buddha’s life, also depict the positive relationship

¹⁴⁰ A message by the Earl of Willingdon, Viceroy and Governor of India, H.E. Lord Willingdon was read during the presentation of the sacred relics. See *History of the Mulagandha Kuty Vihara Sacred Relics and Wall Paintings at Isipatana: the First Preaching place of the Buddha*, 64.

¹⁴¹ *History of the Mulagandha Kuty Vihara Sacred Relics and Wall Paintings at Isipatana: the First Preaching place of the Buddha*, 65.

¹⁴² Singh, *Where the Buddha Walked*, 143.

¹⁴³ Henry Steel Olcott believed in a universal and unified Buddhism: his text, *The Buddhist Catechism*, and his conception of the Buddhist flag (designed by Hikkaduve) represent a “Buddhism Universalized,” and Dharmapala typically included words like “all Buddhists” or “all 475 Buddhists” while talking about reclaiming Buddhist sites. See Kemper, *Rescued from the Nation: Anagarika Dharmapala and the Buddhist World*, 147, 94.

¹⁴⁴ Singh, *Where the Buddha Walked*, 144.

between Dharmapala and the Japanese Government. After the completion of the frescoes in 1936, Mr. K. Yonezawa, Consul-General of Japan rejoiced:

Japan and India have been united by the bond of culture and religion for the last 14 centuries. The rise of Japan as a great and united nation dates from the time of the introduction of Buddhism.... Japanese people have the greatest regard for India as the home of Buddhism, a fact to which I can bear personal testimony as I had the privilege of visiting that great country recently... I fervently hope that the completion of these paintings will usher in another period of cultural and religious cooperation between the Buddhists of Japan and the Hindus and Buddhists of India, who call their religion by the one comprehensive term of *Arya Dharma*.¹⁴⁵

Furthermore, there is a huge bell on the site, which was donated by the Society of Japan.



Figure 1. An image of the big bell donated by the Society of Japan to the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara.

¹⁴⁵ *History of the Mulagandha Kutu Vihara Sacred Relics and Wall Paintings at Isipatana: the First Preaching place of the Buddha*, 75. During my fieldwork in Sarnath, I came across a building by the Maha Bodhi Society known as the Arya Dharma Sangha Dharmashala, also known as Maha Bodhi Birla Dharmashala.

There is also a Bodhi tree on the site, which is said to be a sampling of the original *pipal* tree in Bodhgaya. Around the tree there is an image of the Buddha imparting the four noble truths, created by the devotees of Myanmar and installed under the Bodhi tree in 1999. Despite the fact that the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara is known as a Sri Lankan temple, the idea of a unified Buddhism is still present as the Sri Lankan and other pilgrims engage in rituals that incorporate all aspects of the site.



Figures 2 and 3. Images capture a ceremony performed by Sri Lankan Buddhists, which was witnessed by the author. The pilgrims first went into the main temple at the Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, then proceeded to walk to the part of the site donated by Buddhist delegates from Myanmar. The assimilation of Japanese, Burmese, and Sri Lankan components set the site apart from all the other Buddhist temples in Sarnath. The universal Buddhist flag was also carried around by the pilgrims until it was finally set up on the Bodhi tree near the end of the ceremony.

In 1933, the Maha Bodhi Society circulated a proposal that each Buddhist country, including Japan, Siam, Burma, Ceylon, China, Tibet, and Nepal should build cottages where monks from the respective countries may study Pali, Sanskrit, and various other languages, and “form a nucleus of the International Buddhist Institute.”¹⁴⁶ Dharmapala did not live to witness the abundance of monasteries and educational institutions present in Sarnath today. That same year, Dharmapala died in Sarnath, but the Maha Bodhi

¹⁴⁶ *The Maha Bodhi (Centenary Volume)*, vol. 98-99 (1891-1991), The Maha Bodhi Journal for the Mahabodhi Society of India (Calcutta, India: Maha Bodhi Society of India, 1991), 139.

Society continued to pursue projects for establishing Buddhist institutions at the site and attracted more patrons. For instance, Seth Jugal Kishore Birla from a well-known wealthy Hindu family sponsored the construction of a new Dharmashala or Guest House for the Maha Bodhi Society. His support may be attributed to his belief that there was no fundamental difference between Hinduism and Buddhism.¹⁴⁷ On December 28th, 1934, the first stone for the new Dharmashala was laid down by Pandit Madan Mohan Malaviya, a great scholar and the founder of Banaras Hindu University (BHU) in Varanasi. After its construction, the building was entirely donated to the Maha Bodhi Society, but the maintenance fees were still the responsibility of the sponsors.¹⁴⁸ The plans regarding an International Buddhist Institute or an International Buddhist University Association have not materialized, but Dharmapala's perception of Sarnath as an important Buddhist education site, considering its relation to the Buddha's first sermon, is shared by the Tibetan Buddhists.¹⁴⁹

Due to various patrons, Hindus and Buddhists alike, the Maha Bodhi Society has established a free clinic, the Maha Bodhi Society library, a primary and a high school, as well as a hostel for pilgrims and teachers in training. Dharmapala's revivalist efforts kick-started a renewed and passionate interest among Buddhists from various countries, the presence of whom can be witnessed in Sarnath today. Dharmapala's significance as the modern revivalist of Buddhism is exemplified by the Dharmapala Monument at Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, the Dharmapala Road, the Maitri Buddha Temple (Japanese

¹⁴⁷ *The Maha Bodhi (Centenary Volume)*, 98-99 (1891-1991).

¹⁴⁸ *The Maha Bodhi (Centenary Volume)*, 98-99 (1891-1991): 139-40.

¹⁴⁹ There are two Tibetan Buddhist academic institutions in Sarnath.

Temple) and the Anagarika Dharmapala Museum.¹⁵⁰ In front of the Maitri Buddha temple is a statue of Dharmapala, and the temple itself has pictures of him. The museum, situated right beneath the temple, consists of his personal diaries, works, and images. Anagarika Dharmapala's passion and enthusiasm facilitated an important link between Indian and Japanese Buddhism and over time, his aspirations of reclaiming Buddhist sites in India is gradually being accomplished. Both Bodhgaya and Sarnath have become important hubs for Buddhists around the world, and the Government of India has also taken an interest in the development of the Buddhist Circuit. While the support of the national and provincial government and transnational Buddhist groups has led to the establishment of an "international Buddhist nucleus," the different, sometimes conflicting, interests of various stakeholders should be examined carefully.

The Government of India and Buddhism

Following India's independence from British colonial rule, Jawaharlal Nehru, the leader of the Indian National Congress, was elected as the First Prime Minister of India. Throughout his life, Nehru had revered and admired the memory of the Buddha. In two of his famous books *Autobiography* (1936) and *The Discovery of India* (1946), Nehru mentions that he was inspired by Sir Edwin Arnold's discussion of the Buddha as "a great social reformer."¹⁵¹ Nehru had also traveled to numerous Buddhist countries and was especially attracted to Ceylon. Additionally, he was not interested in building state power via military forces and viewed defense spending as detrimental to economic growth and civilian dominance.¹⁵² By calling for peaceful coexistence between different nations and

¹⁵⁰ The Maitri Buddha Temple is locally referred to as the "Buddhist temple," and it is located right above the Anagarika Dharmapala museum.

¹⁵¹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 51.

¹⁵² S.P. Cohen, *India: Emerging Power* (Brookings Institution Press, 2004), 128.

people, Nehru looked to figures like the Buddha, emperor Asoka, and Gandhi to build India's soft power via foreign policy.¹⁵³ Accordingly, following independence, several Buddhist symbols were adopted as the icons of the Government of India. These included the Lion-capital from the Asokan pillar at Sarnath and the Dharma Wheel or the Dharmachakra, which represents "turning the wheel of Dharma" or Buddha's first teachings at Sarnath. The strategic use of these symbols "not only signified India's inter-Asian cultural power as the birthplace of this great world religion but also provided a 'neutral symbol' for navigating through the volatile Hindu-Muslim divide, especially in the aftermath of the Partition."¹⁵⁴ Moreover, Holt notes that since Buddhism was no longer firmly established in India, it was no longer perceived as a threat to normative Hinduism.¹⁵⁵

During his speeches and correspondence with neighboring countries, Nehru would celebrate the Buddha's message and emphasize its cultural ties to other Asian countries:

If a nation is to be great, she cannot afford to have any barriers between her and the outside world or between different sections of her own people. If such barriers do exist, such a nation cannot influence the world nor can she take advantage of the experiences and discoveries of each other's countries. After a continuous study of the history of India, I have noticed that whenever the nation has been at the peak of her greatness there have been few barriers between her and other nations. At such times her influence has spread far beyond her frontiers as ancient monuments at places like Angkor in Siam proved. India's strength had been cultural and

¹⁵³ The term 'soft power,' was coined by Joseph Nye (1990) in his book *Bound to Lead: The Changing Nature of American Power*. According to Nye (2008: 94), soft power is simply "the ability to affect others to obtain the outcomes one wants through attraction rather than coercion or payment. A country's soft power rests on its resources of culture, values, and policies." For more, see Joseph S Nye Jr, "Public Diplomacy and Soft Power," *The Annals of the American Academy of Political and Social Science* 616, no. 1 (2008).

¹⁵⁴ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 52.

¹⁵⁵ Vivekananda was the first one to transform the Buddha's role in modern India, which later inspired Nehru. Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 18.

did not arise from military strength. Her great men, too, like Gautama Buddha and Mahatma Gandhi belonged to the world (Nehru 1948, 5).¹⁵⁶

While Dharmapala's vision of a unified Buddhist Asia has not become a reality, Vivekananda's transformation of the Buddha as a great reformer and teacher was highly regarded by nationalist leaders during the independence movement. In his memoirs, Nehru wrote about the Buddha's image as an inspiration for India's struggle for independence:

The conception of the Buddha, to which innumerable loving hands have given shape in a carven stone and marble and bronze, *seems to symbolize the whole spirit of Indian thought...* The ages roll by and Buddha seems not so far away after all, his voice whispers in our ears and tells us not to run away from the struggle but, calm-eyed, to face it... *The nation and race which can produce such magnificent type must have deep reserves of wisdom and inner strength...* His appeal was to logic, reason and experience, his emphasis was on ethics, and his method was psychological analysis."¹⁵⁷

Nehru wished to promote India as 'the homeland of Eastern religion,' and to stimulate pilgrimage from other Buddhist countries. In 1956, he invited neighboring Buddhist countries to celebrate the 2500th Buddha Jayanti commemorating the birth, enlightenment, and passing of the Buddha. This event, which was part of a cultural year-long program, marked the "re-emergence of a pan-Asian Buddhist movement," and re-established Buddhist sacred geography in India.¹⁵⁸ Moreover, in preparation for the commemoration, a number of Buddhist sites received a makeover to enhance the beauty

¹⁵⁶ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 39.

¹⁵⁷ This quote also reflects Vivekananda's discourse on modern Hinduism as rational and scientific. Additionally, Mahatma Gandhi stated: "I have not a shadow of doubt that he [the Buddha] will rank among the greatest teachers of mankind." Quotations cited in Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 21-22.

¹⁵⁸ Notice that these celebrations were not identified as religions ones. This strategy was part of the Nehruvian global rhetoric, which also encouraged religious neutrality in order to maintain peace between different religions, creeds, and ideologies. David Geary and Sraman Mukherjee, "Buddhism in Contemporary India," *The Oxford Handbook of Contemporary Buddhism* (2016).

of India's cultural heritage. A book entitled *2500 Years of Buddhism*, which served as a pilgrimage guidebook, was produced and distributed by the Government of India to the invitees, which reinforced "the universal significance for modern, international Buddhism."¹⁵⁹ During this time, the various Buddhist governments were encouraged to establish their own religious institutions in Bodhgaya.¹⁶⁰ The Government of India provided rent-free land in various pilgrimage centers to allow Buddhist groups to build their own respective temples and rest-houses.¹⁶¹

The Buddhist Circuit and Spiritual Tourism

In addition to Nehru's strategic use of India's Buddhist history, one cannot deny that India's greatest treasure is the Indic civilization, which dates back more than 5000 years, and has taken diverse forms – religion, philosophy, arts, language and literature, travel, and so on. This civilization also gave birth to world religions like Hinduism, Buddhism, Sikhism, and Jainism. It is indeed India's cultural, religious, and spiritual resources that have been marketed in order to promote India abroad.¹⁶²

In the last few decades, tourism has become an important part of India's economic liberalization program, and it has been central to branding India's image. Tourism is also one of the first government-sponsored industries to be privatized, and state governments have been encouraged to identify key heritage, historical, and cultural sites for infrastructure development in an attempt to promote tourism.¹⁶³ In 1982, several "travel circuits" were formulated to maximize the profits from tourism, with the Buddhist circuit

¹⁵⁹ Geary and Mukherjee, "Buddhism in Contemporary India," 47.

¹⁶⁰ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism," 11-12.

¹⁶¹ Geary and Mukherjee, "Buddhism in Contemporary India," 47.

¹⁶² Daya Thussu, *Communicating India's Soft Power: Buddha to Bollywood* (Springer, 2013), 11-12.

¹⁶³ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 158.

considered a priority, especially by the state of Bihar. As Geary states, the merging of pilgrimage and tourism is not a new social phenomenon, but the “outfitting of sacred sites and spaces of worship with explicit consumerist messages certainly is.”¹⁶⁴ The inclusion of the Buddhist Circuit as part of spiritual tourism has been a strategic choice. While the term ‘religious’ may have institutional connotations, the term ‘spiritual’ evokes a sense of personal experiences and may include religious and cultural sites as well, which is especially attractive to ‘neoliberal’ Western individuals. According to Carrette and King, religion has been “repackaged and commodified for consumption through the idea of spirituality.”¹⁶⁵

In order to attract financial investment for its Buddhist circuit, the Ministry of Tourism and Culture collaborated with foreign governments, including the United States of America and Japan. In 1987, the International Affairs Office of the United States National Park Services (NPS) formed a team consisting of specialists from Japan, architecture consultants, and some faculty and students from the University of Illinois. They were asked to survey nine sites in the state of Bihar and Uttar Pradesh (including Bodhgaya and Sarnath) to decide which site requires further site-specific master plans. The NPS team prioritized Sarnath, but the state government appointed New Delhi-based School of Planning and Architecture to formulate a draft plan for Bodhgaya and Rajgir-Nalanda to be developed via aid provided by the Japanese through Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECF).¹⁶⁶ The Japanese government provided economic assistance

¹⁶⁴ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya.*, 159. This was part of a “broader decentralization strategy to diffuse the economic and infrastructural benefits of tourism.”

¹⁶⁵ Richard King and Jeremy Carrette, *Selling spirituality: The silent takeover of religion* (Routledge, 2004), 171.

¹⁶⁶ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya.*, 159-60.

for the development of basic infrastructure at Buddhist sites in Bihar: Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, and Vaishali; and at other Buddhist heritage sites like the Ajanta-Ellora caves in Maharashtra.¹⁶⁷

In 1992, the Ministry of Tourism shifted its attention to the development of the Buddhist sector for the Japanese market. The survey revealed that the number of Japanese visitors to India had doubled since 1982 and that there was a lot of potential for states like Bihar to benefit from tourism along the Buddhist circuit. Additionally, the survey disclosed that the Japanese viewed India as a “religious and mysterious place... linked with the desire ‘to see’ or ‘to know’ India, rather than to relax or to enjoy themselves.”¹⁶⁸ However, there was also an indication that “security” and proper “sanitation” were key factors among Japanese consumers. Based on these surveys collected from Japanese Buddhist pilgrims and other general tourists, the Ministry of Tourism and the Government of India recognized the potential of India’s religious sites as tourist spots, as well as the need for basic infrastructure development (including sanitation, security, and transportation) as part of its promotion of India and the Buddhist circuit.¹⁶⁹ The most popular and arguably successful tourist campaign, known as ‘Incredible India,’ was launched in 2002.

¹⁶⁷ Rajgir is considered to be the place where the Buddha set in motion the second wheel of law. Vaishali is said to be the place where the Buddha taught his last sermon. Nalanda is a famous tourist and pilgrimage destination due to the presence of the Nalanda University, which influenced many South Asian traditions and thinkers, including Mahayana and Vajrayana Buddhist traditions. The Ajanta caves consist of Buddhist sculptures and paintings. Similarly, Ellora is a rock-cut cave temple and monastery complex which includes Buddhist, Hindu, and Jain monuments and iconography.

¹⁶⁸ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 162.

¹⁶⁹ For this thesis, I am just focusing on the Buddhist Circuit but I want to note that the other religious circuits, Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Sikhism have also been diligently promoted. Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 162.

Conclusion

A closer look at the historical development of the sites, after the Buddha's time, reveals that these spaces have always been significant for pilgrimage activity and have been recognized transnationally. Despite the popular narrative regarding Buddhism's decline in India, I have shown that the Buddhist sacred geography in India may have been neglected for a while, but it was not considered irrelevant. The Burmese missions, the reverence of Buddhist images by the Mahant and other Hindus, Sir Edwin Arnold's wish to bring back what was lost to the Buddhist world, and Anagarika Dharmapala's passionate will to reclaim Buddhist sites in India have contributed to the various meanings that these sites, especially the Mahabodhi Temple, hold for Buddhists around the world.

The image of the Buddha himself has been transformed and reinterpreted in India over time: his Buddha avatara as a deceitful teacher and then his role as a great reformer with global appeal. While the latter is a favorable interpretation, it still subordinates the Buddha within the Hindu context. As I indicated earlier, Dharmapala was unhappy with this new rendition of the Buddha. Nevertheless, it is this rhetorical device that was at the forefront of the independence movement. Moreover, the implementation of Buddhist symbols by Nehru added a new dimension in conjunction with the rise of the modern nation-state, and to the image of India both nationally and internationally. The interest of the government in its Buddhist heritage goes beyond its foreign policy. The Ministry of Tourism has invested in the Buddhist circuit since, in addition to its link to other Asian countries, there may be potential for gaining revenue via religious or spiritual tourism, and for rehabilitating Bihar's image as divinely peaceful.

Destination India: Tourism and Pilgrimage in Sarnath

A critical constraint in tourism expansion is our lack of quality experience on the ground. Although India's USP [Unique Selling Proposition] is its matchless heritage sites, on the ground there is shockingly poor sanitation and safety. These tourism infrastructure deficiencies can derail India's thrust to become a world-class global destination. So tourism has to become everyone's concern. The "Incredible India" branding cannot be isolated from the ground reality. Essentially, a brand is what a brand does. The campaign cannot be sustained if the quality of experience offered to tourists does not remain credible. Infrastructure development and destination management, therefore, hold the key to India's sustained growth in the tourism sector.

- Amitabh Kant, *India Today*, 2009

Incredible India and Branding of India for Tourism

In 2002, the Incredible India campaign was launched as a way of rebranding the image of India as a commodity and an “object of global consumerism.”¹⁷⁰ This campaign largely focused on portraying India as a land of indescribable spiritual experience, which emphasized the journey of transcendence and enlightenment.¹⁷¹ Before the Incredible India¹⁷² campaign (IIC), India had 18 different tourist offices located abroad. None of the offices had a clear, uniform message about what India symbolized as a tourist destination; each had its own advertising agency and its own branding term for India, such as “Unbelievable India,” “Colours of India,” and “Spiritual and Cultural India.”¹⁷³

According to Amitabh Kant, a key figure in the establishment of the Incredible India

¹⁷⁰ David Geary, "Incredible India in a Global Age: The Cultural Politics of Image Branding in Tourism," *Tourist Studies* 13, no. 1 (2013): 40.

¹⁷¹ Geary, "Incredible India in a Global Age," 40.

¹⁷² The “Incredible India” logo incorporates an exclamation mark instead of the I to indicate a world of possibilities. See Ravinder Kaur, "Post-exotic India: On Remixed Histories and Smart Images," *Identities* 23, no. 3 (2016): 314.

¹⁷³ R Harish, "Brand Architecture in Tourism Branding: The Way Forward for India," *Journal of Indian Business Research* 2, no. 3 (2010): 158.

Campaign, the marketing of India as a global tourist destination was unorganized and uninspired until his appointment as the joint secretary in Ministry of Tourism in 2002.¹⁷⁴

Furthermore, Kant understood that branding India is a complicated task since it is a “multi-product destination.”¹⁷⁵ In order to successfully tackle this question, Kant utilized the diversified cultural aspects that the various states had to offer. As a result, the different states were encouraged to develop their own logos, taglines and regional images that would harmoniously blend with mother India’s brand.¹⁷⁶ This resulted in various other campaigns, including “God’s Own Country” for Kerala¹⁷⁷, “Blissful Bihar,” and “UP nahin dekha toh India nahin dekha”¹⁷⁸ for the state of Uttar Pradesh.



Figure 4. “Flavours of India.” Image by StudioCreativeme, representing Rajasthan, Kerala, and Punjab respectively (February 2017).

¹⁷⁴ Harish, "Brand Architecture," 158.

¹⁷⁵ Nandan Nilekani and Andrew Heyward, "Brand India—Where Next? A Panel Discussion," *Journal of Applied Corporate Finance* 20, no. 1 (2008): 8-27.

¹⁷⁶ Geary, "Incredible India in a Global Age," 42.

¹⁷⁷ This campaign was led by Amitabh Kant. Its success resulted in Kant’s involvement in India’s Ministry of Tourism department, and the startup of the Incredible India campaign.

¹⁷⁸ The tagline for Uttar Pradesh’s tourism campaign has been subject to changes in different ad campaigns. The current tagline, launched in 2017, reads “UP nahin dekha toh India nahin dekha,” which loosely translates to “If you have not seen UP (Uttar Pradesh), then you have not seen India.” Before then, UP’s tagline was “Amazing Heritage, Grand Experiences.”

Additionally, one of Kant's goals included the engagement of the Indian people in the process of India's brand-building.¹⁷⁹ The Government of India has taken steps to include the common people via ad campaigns that include famous Bollywood movie stars, and by holding contests that encourage citizens to actively participate in the positive image-building process of their respective states for a cash prize. In 2017, for instance, the Ministry of Tourism and the Government of Uttar Pradesh initiated a contest for a suggestion regarding UP's tagline, which encouraged Indian citizens to help promote and summarize what the state has to offer to those who wish to visit. Although the winner's tagline has not been incorporated on the website yet, this indicates the importance of community involvement in the production and maintenance of the branding campaigns locally and nationally.¹⁸⁰

The Incredible India campaign was the winner of the Pacific Asia Travel Association (PATA) Gold Award for "Best Print Ad Campaign," and "Best Destination Marketing Campaign" in 2007. Recently, the IIC won the "Best Travel Advertisement Print Media" in 2017. Due to the success of the Incredible India campaign, many projects have been put forward to better address some issues that have hindered the holistic experience promised to tourists, which includes enhancement of India's pilgrimage sites.

Sarnath: Before Incredible India

In 1987, the National Parks Services (NPS) from the United States collaborated with the Government of India to undertake a survey of notable Buddhist sites associated with the Buddha's life. As I mentioned in the last chapter, of the nine sites in UP and

¹⁷⁹ Nilekani and Heyward, "Brand India—Where Next? A Panel Discussion," 20.

¹⁸⁰ The winner was announced in January 2018. For a list of winners and submissions, refer to "Announcing Winners of the Contest to Suggest a Tagline for Uttar Pradesh Tourism," <https://blog.mygov.in/announcing-winners-of-the-contest-to-suggest-a-tagline-for-uttar-pradesh-tourism/>.

Bihar, Sarnath was selected on a priority basis for a location-specific master plan for tourism development.¹⁸¹ The site had been evaluated based on its appeal to different types of visitors: religious pilgrims, who consider the eight sites related to Buddha's biography as the most significant; scholars and students, who are interested in archaeological artifacts, excavated sites, and museums; general tourists, who value convenience in transportation, the aesthetic quality of the site, and fascinating historical narratives; and local users, which includes those who travel from Varanasi leisurely and the residents who produce and sell souvenirs and interact with tourists.¹⁸²

“Sarnath: A Master Plan for Tourism Development” (1988) was designed after the completion of the survey. The team consisted of the Ministry of Tourism and Civil Aviation, Government of India, National Park Services, United States Department of the Interior, and selected student and faculty from the University of Illinois. The master plan outlined numerous goals for Sarnath, including the enhancement and preservation of the resources at the site, to express the significance of Sarnath by talking about the Buddha's life, and to improve the facilities available to visitors. Moreover, the team recognized that “in terms of Sarnath's rich religious heritage, much of tourism ‘is rooted in pilgrimage.’”¹⁸³ They also acknowledged that since 1970, the vast majority of foreign travelers in Sarnath are Europeans and North Americans.¹⁸⁴ A team appointed by the

¹⁸¹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 170.

¹⁸² Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 169-70.

¹⁸³ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 170.

¹⁸⁴ This finding is consistent with my personal observations in Sarnath. As I will discuss later on, however, the domestic tourists outnumber the foreign visitors considerably.

Government of Bihar, and ultimately the Government of India, succeeded in persuading the Indian government and Japanese sponsors to invest in Bodhgaya.¹⁸⁵

In 1998, the “Ancient Buddhist Site” of Sarnath was submitted by the Archaeological Survey of India (ASI) for recognition as a World Heritage Site (WHS) by UNESCO. Many of the monuments and temples are currently present on the tentative list. These have been divided into two groups: Group A consists of the Chaukhandi stupa, and Group B includes the rest of the monuments and the Asokan Pillar.¹⁸⁶ These sites are still on the tentative list, and according to the *Report of the Comptroller and Auditor General of India on Performance Audit of Preservation and Conservation of Monuments and Antiquities*, published by the Ministry of Culture in 2013, the nominations were to be revised and updated according to UNESCO guidelines at least once every ten years. However, upon further investigation, the consultants noticed that: “the ASI had not defined any specific criteria for the selection of sites to be nominated on the tentative list... There were no guidelines for development of sites selected.” Furthermore, there was a lack of proper planning that has contributed to the stagnant status of the site even today. In a recent publication, Rana P.B. Singh and Pravin Singh Rana (2017) stated that since its nomination, no further attempts have been made to get the ancient site of Sarnath

¹⁸⁵ As stated in the previous chapter, the Bihar state government had appointed its own design team, the School of Planning and Architecture (SPA) in New Delhi, to formulate a master plan for Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Nalanda and Vaishali. According to Geary (2009: 171), unlike the other master plan drafts, the one formulated by the SPA was critical of the lack of governance and socio-economic and physical development in Bihar. According to the consultants, there were “major setbacks in terms of catering to the Southeast Asian and Japanese markets... [since] Japan had emerged as a major contributor to the world tourism market,” and the Buddhist Circuit could be a profitable resource. However, the disregard for the resources, and the lack of competent facilities and authority hindered its ability to compete with other world destinations. As a result, the argument for development in Bihar won over the allure Sarnath had as a Buddhist pilgrimage town.

¹⁸⁶ See “Ancient Buddhist Site, Sarnath, Varanasi, Uttar Pradesh,” <http://whc.unesco.org/en/tentativelists/1096/>.

inscribed in the World Heritage List. Moreover, they remarked: “it is sad to record that there is a lack of co-ordination between Japanese donors and the Indian institutions involved in planning.”¹⁸⁷ The revered site, which includes various ancient monasteries and the ancient Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, lacks proper supervision and maintenance.

Developmental Projects by the Government of India and Ministry of Tourism

“The Swadesh Darshan Scheme” (2014-2015), which focused on cultural, religious, historical, and natural heritage, was launched for integrated development of theme-based tourist circuits. This plan was envisioned by the Government of India and Ministry of Tourism with the aim of “positioning the tourism sector as a major engine for job creation, driving force for economic growth, building synergy with various sectors to enable tourism to realise its potential.”¹⁸⁸ A Tourist Circuit was defined as “a route having at least three major tourist destinations which are distinct and apart,” and the Buddhist Circuit was one of the themes selected for development. Unfortunately, the development of the Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh excluded Sarnath from the list of sites.¹⁸⁹ In 2016, the “5th International Buddhist Conclave” was organized in Sarnath for the first time, and was attended by more than 240 delegates from 39 countries. During the meeting, Mahesh Sharma, the Union Minister of State for Culture commented:

India is the seat of Spiritual Tourism and Government of India and Government of Uttar Pradesh are committed to develop the Buddhist Circuits... Sarnath will be the hub of Buddhist tourism in India and efforts

¹⁸⁷ Rana PB Singh and Pravin S Rana, "Varanasi: Heritage Zones and its Designation in UNESCO's World Heritage Properties," *Kashi Journal of Social Sciences* 7, no. June-December (Special Issue on "Re-searching Kashi") (December 2017): 207.

¹⁸⁸ See "Swadesh Darshan Scheme: Guidelines shortfor Integrated Development of Theme-Based Tourist Circuits in the Country," (2014-2015), <http://tourism.gov.in/sites/default/files/Other/Guidelines%20final.pdf>.

¹⁸⁹ See "Buddhist Circuit," <http://swadeshdarshan.gov.in/index.php?Theme/themeDetail/2>.

will be made to bring in air, rail and road connections from Sarnath to various Buddhist sites in India.¹⁹⁰

It was also announced that about Rs. 999,700,000 (approximately US \$14,560,263) had been sanctioned towards infrastructure development of the Buddhist Circuit covering Sravasti, Kapilvastu and Kushinagar.¹⁹¹ The main theme of the panel discussions was showcasing “India as [a] Buddhist destination” and creating a transnational Sangha for the global community of Buddhists. The meetings also included Indian and foreign tour operators to enhance the movement of Buddhist pilgrims across the Buddhist Circuit and other Buddhist countries.¹⁹²

In 2017, the Government of India and the Ministry of Tourism launched the “National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive” (PRASAD),¹⁹³ which focuses specifically on religious tourism, which includes pilgrimage.¹⁹⁴ The aim, according to this document, was the improvement of tourism services and identification of infrastructural gaps in the identified destinations, and requires community participation, and promotion of “local arts, culture, handicrafts, cuisine, etc. to generate livelihood in the identified places.” In other words, the promotion of religious tourism focuses on cultural and local aspects that affect the visitors’ experiences, whether they are devout pilgrims or general tourists. The tourism website for

¹⁹⁰ “International Buddhist conclave open session in Sarnath,” *The Times of India*, October 5, 2016, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/International-Buddhist-conclave-open-session-in-Sarnath/articleshow/54685864.cms>.

¹⁹¹ Note that Sarnath is not included in this list, since the money that was sanctioned under the Swadesh Darshan scheme excluded this site.

¹⁹² “International Buddhist conclave open session in Sarnath.”

¹⁹³ In the Budget Speech of 2014-2015, the Government decided to launch the “National Mission on Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive” to encourage the development of pilgrimage sites and invested Rs.100 crore for the year 2016-2017. This decision was based on the rationale that the investment would lead to economic growth and job creation.

¹⁹⁴ As defined in the Introduction of the thesis, I am referring to the definition of religious tourism developed by FICCI in 2012: travel that may be motivated by religious inclinations, or due to cultural, traditional and religious products like art and architecture.

Uttar Pradesh, for example, lists culture, music, dance, arts and craft, literature, museums, architecture, pilgrimage, heritage walk, and traditional fairs and festivals under its “Experience” tab.¹⁹⁵ Varanasi, especially the *ghats* of Banaras, has been the primary destination of focus due to its historical and religious significance for pilgrims, recreational tourists who seek different or spiritual experiences, and those who fall somewhere in between.¹⁹⁶

For example, when I first arrived in Varanasi, I was offered the same “must-do” tour as some Western tourists who had traveled from Denmark. We were told that we would be taken on a boat ride along the banks of the Ganges while being able to witness the Ganga Aarti ceremony. After some informal conversation with the Western tourists, I realized they had come to Varanasi to watch Hindu ceremonies and immerse themselves in the spiritual experience that seemingly emanates from this holy city. Their motivations, although focused on religious activities, were not intentionally or sentimentally religious.

Uttar Pradesh has immeasurable potential as a tourist destination, including wildlife sanctuaries, the Taj Mahal, and various religious and cultural pilgrimage sites related to Hinduism, Islam, Jainism, and Buddhism.¹⁹⁷ Consequently, the “Uttar Pradesh Tourism Policy 2018,” which is framed around the branding of Uttar Pradesh Tourism, has 6 aims: enhancement of the tourism infrastructure, increased employment, improving the Uttar Pradesh brand, focus on religious and spiritual tourism, sustainable tourism, and

¹⁹⁵ "Uttar Pradesh Department of Tourism," <http://uptourism.gov.in/>.

¹⁹⁶ Varanasi is also known as Banaras or Kashi. The banks of the river Ganges are popularly known as the *ghats* of Banaras.

¹⁹⁷ Uttar Pradesh Department of Tourism, <http://uptourism.gov.in/>.

the promotion of theme-based tourism.¹⁹⁸ Unlike the PRASAD initiative, which only focuses on Bodhgaya and Amravati as important Buddhist pilgrimage sites.¹⁹⁹ The “Uttar Pradesh Tourism Policy 2018” recognizes Kapilavastu, Sarnath, Kushinagar, Kaushambi, Sravasti, and Sankisa as important sites on the Buddhist Circuit.²⁰⁰

“Investing in the Buddhist Circuit: Enhancing the spiritual, environmental, social and economic value of the places visited by the Buddha in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India: 2014-2018” is the first document of its kind,²⁰¹ resulting from a collaboration between the Government of India, the Ministry of Tourism, State Governments of Uttar Pradesh and Bihar, Buddhist monasteries and sects, the private sector, and the International Financial Corporation (member of World Bank Group). According to this document, the motivation behind the interest in the development of the Buddhist Circuit is related to the potential of tourism, economic growth, job creation and income generation:

While monks and devotees visiting sites along the Buddhist Circuit are doing so for pilgrimage, the experience for most tourists lacks interpretation and is low in quality. Destinations along the Buddhist Circuit need to transform into interpretive and learning contact points, which in turn will stimulate demand, promote longer stays, and generate a desire to visit other sites and lead to growth in goods and service providers. There is scope to enhance the visitor experience beyond trips to monuments and temples; however, this requires specific interventions in planning, skills development, market access, and access to finance. The strategy outlined in this document seeks to grow the economic impact of

¹⁹⁸ According to the *Uttar Pradesh Tourism Policy 2018*, the Department of Tourism will also focus on eco-tourism, heritage tourism (all UNESCO world heritage sites), wellness tourism (yoga, Ayurveda, naturopathy, homeopathy, etc.), textile tourism, and many more.

¹⁹⁹ Amravati, located in India’s south-eastern state of Andhra Pradesh, is home to the Mahachaitya stupa and other Buddhist sculptures. This site is considered a sacred pilgrimage site according to the Vajrayana school of Buddhism. See Uttar Pradesh Department of Tourism, “*Uttar Pradesh Tourism Policy 2018*,” <http://uptourism.gov.in/pages/top/about-up-tourism/new-tourism-policy-2018>

²⁰⁰ Kapilavastu is considered the childhood home of Siddhartha Gautama. Kaushambi is an important city since the Buddha spent a lot of time in this city, and it is mentioned in several Buddhist texts. Sravasti is the place where the Buddha is said to have manifested into a million-fold form. Sankisa is related to many myths pertaining to the Buddha’s descend from heaven after death.

²⁰¹ The *Action Plan for the Development of the Buddhist Circuit* was launched in 1986, which was aimed at promoting and developing the Buddhist Circuit as part of India “mainstream tourism product.”

tourism along the Buddhist Circuit by attracting higher-spending tourists and linking them to local goods and service providers. This strategy recognizes that both public and private sector investment is required to drive demand and improve quality of experience while respecting, preserving, and enhancing the religious value and significance of the sites.

The statistical data included in “Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018” reveals that Sarnath, Rajgir, Kushinagar, and Bodhgaya attracted around 71% of foreign visitors to the Buddhist Circuit in 2012: 355, 294 foreign visitors went to Sarnath, while Bodhgaya received 207,933 foreign visitors. The 2012 survey of travelers along the Buddhist Circuit also reported some interesting data regarding the different travelers’ motivations: while only 33% of international travelers cited spiritual or religious travel as their reason for a visit in Sarnath, 77% of international travelers to Bodhgaya were religiously inclined. Sarnath was the only exception among all other cities surveyed on the Buddhist Circuit – a large number of international visitors reported leisure and entertainment tourism as their reason for traveling there.²⁰² A higher number of domestic travelers (50%) listed religious and spiritual tourism as their motivation for visiting Sarnath. However, the study exercises attention in treating the statistics regarding the motivations of the domestic travelers as part of the Buddhist Circuit initiative by making note that these visitors likely see sites like Sarnath as holiday or recreation areas which could be attributed to Sarnath’s close proximity to Varanasi.

One of the major strengths of the Buddhist Circuit, as stated in the document, includes the observation that these sites are already important pilgrimage sites that attract Buddhists worldwide, numbering approximately 450 million. Moreover, the presence of monasteries from different Buddhist countries also indicates a steady influx of pilgrims

²⁰² Lumbini (in Nepal), Bodhgaya, Rajgir, Nalanda, Sarnath, and Kushinagar.

from various Asian countries. The “weaknesses” identified in “Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018,” include limited awareness among Buddhists and non-Buddhists not linked to the monasteries; limited tourist packages; lack of proper information; poor management of tourist centers; and lack of community engagement between monasteries, local residents, and government authorities. The document also identifies that there is no coherent branding (like Incredible India) of the Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh, and consequently proposes a logo, with the words “In the footsteps of the Buddha,” that could be utilized by all public and private sectors concerned with Buddhist pilgrimage, spirituality, wellness, and heritage. When I conducted fieldwork in Sarnath, I noticed many similarities between my observations and the survey conducted for the “Investing in Buddhist Circuit” document.

Tourism in Sarnath

On November 11, 2017, I visited Sarnath for the first time. In comparison to my experience in Varanasi city, where I was staying, Sarnath was quiet and less crowded. I was immediately approached by several tour guides, but I was not particularly interested in hiring any of them at the time. I wanted to experience this town on my own. As I began walking down the main road where I was dropped off, I was fascinated by a particular sign that read “Garden of Spiritual Wisdom.”



Figure 5. Garden of Spiritual Wisdom. As the sign indicates, the garden is exclusively aimed at tourists. As I approached the gate, I noticed that the description of the garden was effectively incorporating the different aspects of branding that the Government of Uttar Pradesh was trying to promote. The description goes as follows:

Welcome to the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom.

Pathways of this sacred garden represent one's journey through life.

Please see the sculpture gallery to internalize the essence of Buddhist teachings and Visual gallery to reflect on spirituality.

You can also meditate here and be in harmony with yourself and nature.

See the Ayurvedic plants to know about the traditional natural Indian healing system.

In just about 5 sentences, the information about the garden alludes to spirituality, Buddhism (religiosity), wellness (meditation and Ayurveda), and its audience. I was not the only visitor who was hoping to see this beautiful garden. I was with my father, and there were two other groups behind us that were waiting to sign the register and explore the site. Unfortunately for some, the security guard was quite selective and only allowed

myself, my dad, and a group from Germany to enter the premises. The other group was blatantly told that the garden was “closed for renovations.” I was quite surprised by his behavior, but I would later find out that the gardens are fairly private and only open to certain types of crowds who would help elevate its image according to the organization or government employees’ preferences.



Figure 6. Garden of Spiritual Wisdom. This photograph was taken right at the start of the garden, and it gives a glimpse of what I witnessed throughout my tour. There were only a few tourists (Western), and the only locals I noticed were the workers.

Shortly after my dad and I began exploring the place, we were approached by the “manager” of the garden. He welcomed us and told us that as long as we maintain a quiet and clean environment, we are free to explore the garden as long as we want. I asked him why we were allowed to come in if the garden is closed for renovations. He thought about it for a minute and chuckled. He openly said: “Have you seen the other park [deer park] in the city? It’s filthy. I want this place to be peaceful, clean, and inviting. We want international tourists and the monks and Buddhists that come here. This is a place for

meditation, to escape the hustle and bustle that you experience outside of here. I can tell you are not from around here, which is why you are in here.”²⁰³ He then asked us to find him when we were ready to leave so that we could leave him some feedback about our impressions of the garden.

The manager’s concerns about the kinds of crowds that come into the garden were illustrated by the aesthetics and the choice of primary language in the garden. My experience walking through the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom was indeed different from my experiences in Varanasi. It was quiet and peaceful, and since there were only about 7 visitors in the garden, I had the time to really appreciate my surroundings and explore at my own pace. As indicated by the description, the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom showcases a sculpture gallery that depicts fundamental concepts in Buddhist philosophy, such as the Four Noble Truths and the Eightfold Path. The various sculptures were accompanied by descriptions, which were all written only in English.

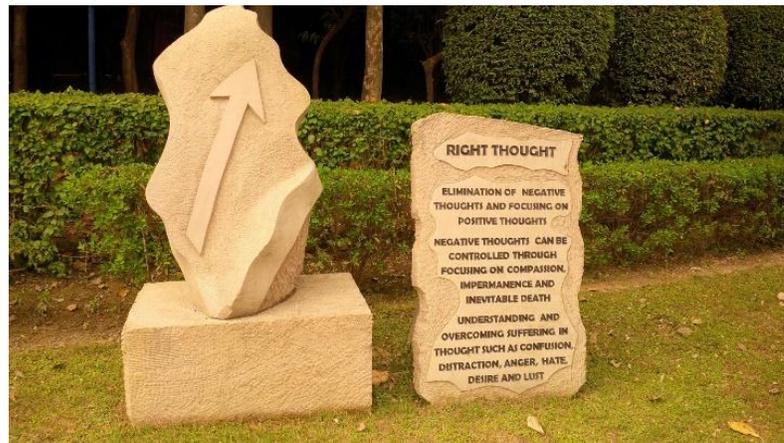


Figure 7. Garden of Spiritual Wisdom. This photograph depicts the sculpture indicating “Right Thought,” one of the tenets of the Noble Eightfold Path, accompanied by a summary in English

²⁰³ This entire conversation was in Hindi, and it has been translated in a way that still captures the meaning.

The description (written in English) of the Ayurveda garden, which is part of the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom, also indicated to me that – in alignment with the Incredible India campaign – the details highlighted India’s cultural, natural, religious, wellness, and specifically spiritual concepts (yoga).



Figure 8. The Ayurveda Garden is part of the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom. It emphasizes the emergence of Ayurvedic practice beyond India’s borders, and its association with wellness, spirituality, Buddhism, and Hinduism.

Near the end of my tour, I stumbled upon a large sculpture, which is divided into three parts. Unlike the rest of the signs and sculptures, the letters on these particular sculptures appeared to be Japanese. The sign beside the sculpture only gave some information about the mantra, but I could not seem to figure out if it was donated by a specific Buddhist group.



Figures 9 & 10. Garden of Spiritual Wisdom. The three sculptures are on the left, and the accompanying sign about the mantra is on the right. There seems to be no other information about these sculptures.

Once I got closer to the end of the path, I was approached by the manager again.

He insisted that we write something about the garden, and that he would upload our comments on their website later. I asked him when the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom was finished, and he told me that it was the “newest attraction in Sarnath, and the project was completed about 3 years ago.” Unfortunately, when I brought up the sculptures with the Japanese characters, he said:

Madam, everything is here because of our Indian Government. I am an employee of the government, and we all owe it to our government. Why does it matter who sponsored them? I don't know why you're questioning these three stones.

He thanked us for visiting and left. I noticed that he really emphasized that it was the State Government that was the main force behind the construction and maintenance of the garden. He was not willing to give me any more information than that. Consequently, I decided I would later take a look at the website that he was referring to in hopes that I would find more information about the garden.

The next site I wished to visit was the Nichigai Suzan Horinji temple, or the ‘Japanese temple’ as the locals like to call it. Unfortunately, the temple was closed for

renovations the entirety of my trip. However, I was able to visit the Vishwa Shanti or World Peace Stupa sponsored by the Dharmachakra Indo-Japan Buddhist Cultural Society and dedicated by the Governor of Uttar Pradesh at the time, Shri B.L. Joshi. This monument, one of the newer attractions, was inaugurated in November 2010. This temple is one of two Nichiren Shu temples located in India.²⁰⁴ Interestingly, the mantra here was the same as the one I at the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom, *Namu Myōhō Renge Kyō*, invokes the title of the Lotus Sutra and it is the central mantra chanted by the followers of Nichiren Buddhism.²⁰⁵ This may indicate some relation between the sculptures in the garden and the sponsors of the Vishwa Shanti Stupa, however, further research is required to confirm this connection.



Figure 11. Children playing at the Vishwa Shanti Stupa. I did not notice any Buddhist pilgrims or Japanese monks at the site.

²⁰⁴ "International Nichiren Shu Temples," updated 2018, <https://www.nichiren.or.jp/english/temples/international/>.

²⁰⁵ My supervisor, Dr. John Harding, mentioned that he had seen similar World Peace (Vishwa Shanti) Stupas in Rajgir and Lumbini (Nepal), as well as stone sculptures akin to the ones I noticed. They had the same *daimoku* (the mantra I mentioned earlier) carved down the middle, along with other characters naming Nichiren and several bodhisattvas.

After my visit to the Japanese temple, I headed to the tourist information center known as the “Modern Reception Centre.”²⁰⁶ According to the UP Tourism website, I should have been able to access the Assistant Tourist Officer’s office, as well as tour guides, public amenities, books, souvenir shops, etc. However, when I got to the Modern Reception Centre, the tourist information office was closed and it did not indicate when the officer was going to be back. I waited for a while and noticed that my dad and I were the only people in the building. Almost all the stores were closed, except for a Travel Agency. This was not a rare occurrence since the office of the Assistant Tourist Officer was closed for the entirety of my trip. On the third day, I asked the travel agent about the information center, and he told me that the tourist officers appointed in Sarnath had decided to help out at the Tourism Office in Varanasi. When I questioned him about this decision, he told me that the office located in Varanasi was in need of more staff and they decided “Sarnath is not really an important tourist place.” At the time, I was shocked that Sarnath was not considered important enough by the appointed tourist officers. Although the State Government had constructed and promoted the “Modern Reception Centre,” the management of these facilities was lacking. Personally, the description on the website varies considerably from the building’s actual presentation and management. As Kant states, “a branding campaign which does not match with the actual experience does damage to the destination rather than promote it.”²⁰⁷ At the ground level, it seems that the Government of UP's attempt at modernizing Sarnath has been discouragingly dismissed. The two most important factors in maintaining the success of tourism in India,

²⁰⁶ See “Modern Reception Centre,” <http://uptourism.gov.in/pages/top/explore/top-explore-varanasi---sarnath/modern-reception-centre>.

²⁰⁷ Amitabh Kant, *Branding India: An Incredible Story* (Uttar Pradesh, India: Harper Collins, 2009).

infrastructure development, and destination management, have been overlooked in Sarnath (with the exception of the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom).

I asked the travel agent if he had a map of Sarnath, when he informed me that there are currently no travel guides or maps specifically for Sarnath. The best he could do was offer me a map of Varanasi, which included some information on Sarnath. However, the map was not detailed enough for me to be able to find the various temples and sites easily. As a result, I mostly used the Maps application on my phone. I noticed this was the popular choice of navigation among other tourists and independent travelers I spoke with. While most admitted they were unaware of the Modern Reception Centre, others expressed their frustrations with the lack of information about the town's tourist attractions.



Figure 12. Map of Varanasi (cropped to highlight Sarnath), Department of Tourism and UP Government

As indicated in the “Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018,” the Buddhist pilgrims have sufficient resources and connections that allow them to complete their pilgrimage comfortably. They do not need to rely on the tourist information center, for example, to get information about the whereabouts of significant sites. In addition to poorly managed tourist information centers, which results in limited awareness among the tourists, there is a lack of engagement between the various Buddhist sects, the locals, the

pilgrims, and the tourists.²⁰⁸ For instance, when I visited the different temples, I noticed that the pilgrims who had connections with the monasteries were offered private tours around town. These tours were conducted in their native language, and they were limited to the particular country of origin that was sponsoring the monastery. For instance, pilgrims from Japan would stay at the Japanese monastery, and they would be accompanied by a monk who would help them with their pilgrimage along the Buddhist Circuit.²⁰⁹

In addition to the division among the Buddhist pilgrims and non-Buddhist tourists, I noticed that the Buddhist sites were identifiable by their nationalities instead of the particular Buddhist sects. This distinction is clearly illustrated in the map of Varanasi pictured earlier. With the exception of Mulagandha Kuti Vihara,²¹⁰ the temples and monasteries were recognized by the names of the countries that sponsored them. For instance, on the map of Varanasi, one can read Chinese Temple, Korean Temple, Thai Monastery, and Burmese Monastery. The local residents, such as the vendors and the rickshaw drivers, did not know the actual names of the temples. Moreover, there were temples, such as the Pink temple and the Golden temple, which most residents did not know about.²¹¹ The main tourist attractions in Sarnath are Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, the Sarnath Archaeological Museum, the Dhamek stupa, and the Excavated Archaeological Site. As a result, I was mostly referred to Mulagandha Kuti Vihara when I asked for

²⁰⁸ One of the “weaknesses” recognized in “Investing in The Buddhist Circuit: Enhancing the spiritual, environmental, social and economic value of the places visited by the Buddha in Bihar and Uttar Pradesh, India: 2014-2018.”

²⁰⁹ I had the opportunity to talk to a few pilgrims from Japan who told me about their experiences with travelling in Sarnath and expressed their gratitude towards the monastery they were staying at.

²¹⁰ Mulagandha Kuti Vihara is a Sri Lankan temple, built by the Mahabodhi Society in 1931.

²¹¹ The Pink Temple is a Vietnamese temple, constructed in 2014. The Golden Temple is a Tibetan temple, and it is part of the Vajra Vidya Institute (a monastic college), which was inaugurated by the 14th Dalai Lama in 1999.

directions for lesser-known temples. I had the same experience when I was looking for the Anagarika Dharmapala Museum, and I was directed to the Sarnath Museum every time.²¹²

Once I got back to the hotel that night, I decided to visit the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom website,²¹³ I noticed that the manager was right. There is no way for anybody else to post comments in the “Visitor’s Comments” section. This also indicates that the comments are carefully chosen by those who run the website. This illustrates that in addition to selectively choosing who gets to enter the premises of the garden, the comments of those visitors are also guarded. As I looked through the comments, I noticed that the themes I observed in the garden and through my conversations with the management were also highlighted in the posts that made the cut. One comment in particular by Leopold Daguir from Melbourne, United States of America perfectly captures the essence of the garden:

It was an amazing experience to visit to this Jewel of Park & gift to humanity and an inspiration for peace and love for nature. Thank [sic] to the Buddhist [sponsors] for this fabulous park and to Mr. Omprakash for his guidance and helpful assistance. Impressed by the four noble truths and the eightfold paths for peace of mind. The park is an island to find tranquility amongst the turmoil of the busy city. It's a natural place to practice yoga and meditation. The silence bust the chirping of birds, a rare sound on [sic] this age & time.²¹⁴

Most of the comments present a romanticized view, especially the part of the comment above that states: “rare sound on [sic] this age & time.” In addition to the comments on the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom website, many of my conversations with

²¹² I eventually found the Anagarika Dharmapala museum after a Tibetan pilgrim overheard my conversation and gave me directions.

²¹³ "Garden of Spiritual Wisdom," www.gardenofspiritualwisdom.org/.

²¹⁴ “Garden of Spiritual Wisdom.”

tourists from Varanasi and Sarnath revealed they agreed with the Incredible India campaign. Varanasi and Sarnath were viewed as the “real” or “authentic” India, with its culture still representing what life may have been like back in the day, and places where the Indian culture was still spiritually engaged.

The orientalist discourse, which utilizes the idea of authenticity, is still an important part of the UP Tourism campaign.²¹⁵ According to Mari Korpela, lifestyle migrants, those who come from abroad and frequently visit India for several months, view Varanasi as an “ancient and spiritual place.” For instance, one of her interviewees, Ivan, stated:

I like Varanasi because it’s something like the heart of India. So much going on also about Indian culture... [...] Varanasi is real India, still happening, and the religion that they practice here, religion is big part of daily life of the people living here, the local people, and it’s a very old city, it’s oldest actually existing city in the world.²¹⁶

When the Incredible India campaign was first launched, exotic and orientalist images were marketed by the Ministry of Tourism.²¹⁷ However, since 2007, the Ministry of Tourism has set forward an image of India’s “newness and progress, [offering] a counterpoint not only to resilient colonial discourses on ‘exotic’ India’s varied bipolar avatars but also to neoliberal exhortations of an ascendant ‘emerging market’ nation that

²¹⁵ Edward Said’s (1978: 115) *Orientalism* is a seminal text on the subject, where he stresses that orientalism was a way of thinking of the “East” as complementary to the West, and “what mattered was not Asia so much as Asia’s use to modern Europe.” This also paved the way for romanticized views of India as the “mystical East” and land of spirituality and potency, which the “West” had left behind. These views were expressed at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions by figures like Vivekananda and Dharmapala, For more information on religious exoticism and romantic orientalist views of India and the “East”, see Véronique Altglas, *From Yoga to Kabbalah: Religious Exoticism and the Logics Of Bricolage* (USA: Oxford University Press, 2014). For a critical study of orientalism in India, see Ronald Inden, "Orientalist Constructions of India," *Modern Asian Studies* 20, no. 3 (1986).

²¹⁶ Mari Korpela, "India has got it!": lifestyle migrants constructing 'Incredible Indias' in Varanasi and Goa," *Etnográfica. Revista do Centro em Rede de Investigação em Antropologia* 21, no. 1) (2017): 157.

²¹⁷ Geary, "Incredible India in a Global Age," 41.

can transport *all* its citizens to the desired endpoint of first world modernity.”²¹⁸ The sign regarding the science of Ayurveda in the garden also points to these efforts by the Indian Government: “Today, Ayurveda is at the forefront of mind-body medicine. It has spread far beyond its traditional base and is gaining attention throughout the world.”

In an interestingly ironic manner, India’s new image is a mixture of progress, modernity, and exotic images that portray India as a mosaic of cultural diversity and luxurious destinations.²¹⁹ The regionalized marketing within the Incredible India campaign has successfully employed images that best represent the various states; for instance, Uttar Pradesh primarily markets Varanasi as a place of enlightenment, spirituality, and sacredness. The advertising of the Buddhist Circuit, although minimal in comparison to Varanasi’s predominant Hindu culture, has also been promoted by the UP Tourism campaign.

When I was doing my fieldwork in Sarnath, many of my conversations with Western tourists revealed similar intentions regarding their trip. Most of them were only in Sarnath for the day, but they had been living in Varanasi for at least a few weeks. None of them were particularly interested in the pilgrimage sites for religious reasons, but they enjoyed visiting the archaeological site, the Sarnath museum, and the different temples to look at the historical and architectural treasures the town had to offer. For many, Sarnath is ultimately a destination for a day trip when domestic or international travelers want to get away from the crowds of Varanasi. This idea was further reinforced when one of the vendors, Raju (age 26), recognized me when I arrived in Sarnath on the second day. He

²¹⁸ Radhika Parameswaran and Pallavi Rao, "Imagining, Imaging, and Implementing the New India," *Journalism & Communication Monographs* 20, no. 1 (2018): 74.

²¹⁹ Geary, "Incredible India in a Global Age," 42.

also offered his assistance to guide us (my father and I) if we ever get lost.²²⁰ On the third day, Raju offered us some Banarasi chai. We became fairly good friends, and he freely shared his experiences with us when I asked him questions regarding tourism and its effect on his livelihood as a souvenir shop vendor. He informed me that although there are a lot of Buddhist monks and pilgrims in Sarnath, they rarely shopped for souvenirs:

The Buddhists do not buy from us. They are here to go to temples, pray, meditate, and they live in their quarters. Only tourists come here and they shop for souvenirs that they could show off back home. I do not see this as the only source of my livelihood. I am just helping my family. I would not be able to support my entire family solely from this income.

“The Investing in the Buddhist Circuit” document recognizes the potential for economic growth if more international tourists are drawn to Sarnath. Until then, vendors like Raju would not be able to sustain a living based solely on one household income. Projects have been planned to attract a higher number of Buddhists to Sarnath, but the completion has yet to be determined. On March 16th, 2018, *Times of India* announced that a light and sound show on the Buddha’s life will be beginning at the end of May 2018. As of July 2018, there are still no updates on the production of the show. According to this article, the sound and light show has been delayed since 2002. Avinash Mishra, the Joint Director of Uttar Pradesh Tourism, states in the article:

The content of the film had been revised twice in recent months. Need of a perfect content of the film on Lord Buddhas [sic] life is being realized because the sound and light show will be viewed by people from across the globe. It is felt that the life of Lord Buddha since childhood to his Parinirvana is presented in the proposed show perfectly. All corrective

²²⁰ Names of any persons I met during my fieldwork will be pseudonyms to protect their identity. Oddly, Raju did not know where most of the Buddhist places were! However, his presence was reassuring that we had a friend if we were ever in need of assistance.

measures are being ensured before production because a major investment is being done on it and such film cant [sic] be made repeatedly.²²¹

The enhancement of tourism in Sarnath is complicated due to its significance as a pilgrimage site among the Buddhist community, and due to its potential to attract domestic and international tourists that generally travel to Varanasi. Consequently, Sarnath has been subjected to various, at times conflicting, stakeholders – the State Government’s department of tourism, the different Buddhist groups, and the primarily Hindu local population. While the State Government recognizes that Sarnath needs to be marketed more frequently, most of the local residents, especially the employees of the tourist information center, do not regard Sarnath as a potentially profitable tourist site. This can be partly attributed to the fact that most locals, with the exception of the tour guides, do not view the tourist industry as a great source of income for sustainable livelihood. On the other hand, the tour guides were heavily invested and most spoke more than two languages.²²² Moreover, my fieldwork revealed that many of the Buddhist residents and pilgrims were not interested in promoting tourism, since it has already been established that their own pilgrimage networks have been successful on their own.

Buddhist Educational Institutions in Sarnath

In addition to the Buddhist stupas, monuments, relics, and temples, there are two educational institutions in Sarnath. The Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies (CIHTS) is the only Tibetan university of its kind and offers an array of courses in

²²¹ Rajeev Dikshit, "Light and Sound Show on Buddha's Life by May," *The Times of India*, March 16, 2018, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/light-and-sound-show-on-buddhas-life-by-may/articleshow/63327389.cms>.

²²² Many of the tour guides knew how to speak either Spanish, French, or German in addition to English and Hindi. Notice this list does not include languages generally spoken by travelers from Buddhist countries.

Buddhist philosophy, Sanskrit and Tibetan languages, Tibetan Medicine, Astrology, and Psychology. The CIHTS University was founded in 1967 by Jawaharlal Nehru and the 14th Dalai Lama. It is funded by the Government of India and the Ministry of Culture.²²³ The university has collaborated with several universities in India, and other international academic institutions from the United States of America, Austria, Russia, Korea, and China.²²⁴ It is also open to all four lineages of Tibetan Buddhism.²²⁵ When I first arrived at the gates of this university, the guard did not allow me to go in. He told me that this was a place for studies and it is not open to tourists. I informed him that I was a student and I was researching Buddhist sites in Sarnath. He paused for a bit, and then he told me that I could go in as long as I do not cause any disturbance by making noise or taking pictures. He gave me ten minutes to explore, but I was forbidden from going inside any of the buildings. Considering its size, I was surprised that not many locals knew about this university. The university has its own library, hostel, a small temple, and other amenities. There were a few students studying in the garden that is situated in the middle of the university campus. My experience was unlike any universities I have visited in Canada; it was very peaceful and quiet. When I exited the campus, I thanked the security guard for his generosity. He was grateful that I had obeyed the rules of the university. I asked him why the university was not known among the locals, and he uttered that it is probably for the best.

²²³ See Professor Geshe Ngawang Samten, "Vice-Chancellor's Message: Welcome to the World of Central University of Tibetan Studies," <http://www.cuts.ac.in/index.php?url=content/ab1vcd>.

²²⁴ "International relations," updated 2018, <http://www.cuts.ac.in/index.php?url=content/ac7ir>.

²²⁵ Gloria Jones, "Vajra vidya institute: Sarnath, india," <http://www.rinpoche.com/sarnath.html>.

The Vajra Vidya Institute was established by Thrangu Rinpoche and inaugurated by the 14th Dalai Lama in 1999.²²⁶ Unlike the Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, monastic training includes the study of major texts of the Kagyu lineage. The monks are required to follow a seven-year program, while they study Buddhist philosophy, logic, debate, grammar, poetry, and the Tibetan language. While I was conducting fieldwork, I had a really difficult time getting to the Vajra Vidya Institute's Golden Temple (because most rickshaw drivers did not know where it was). When I finally reached my destination, I was greeted by one of the monks who was in charge of taking care of the premises. Unlike any other temples, I had to sign my name in the register and give a reason for my visit. I told the monk that I was doing some research, and I would really like to see the Golden Temple. I was only allowed in if I agreed to be quiet and refrain from taking pictures. I promised to comply, and walked in. I noticed that the Vajra Vidya Institute is smaller than the university; however, it has its own living quarters and classrooms, and it even has a little bookshop where you can buy some books related to Tibetan Buddhism. While I was looking around, the monk approached me and asked me what I thought about the temple. I told him that it is absolutely beautiful and it surprises me that not many people know about it. He looked at me and smiled:

I know. This is the nicest temple in town, but I am glad that we do not get many tourists. This is a place for studying the Dharma, for offering prayers, and for meditating. It would be a shame if we were suddenly surrounded by tourists who are only interested in taking selfies.

I had to agree with him. He was describing a scene I noticed at many different temples that received lots of tourists. He was really happy with my answer, so he asked me to

²²⁶ "About Vajra Vidya Insitute," updated 2016, <http://vajravidya.org/about-institute.html#about>. The Vajra Vidya Institute is associated with the Golden Temple.

follow him and showed me a sculpture of the Buddha that had arrived from a Buddhist institution in China. He told me that it was going to be circulating across the Buddhist Circuit in India, and he was excited that Sarnath was the first place to receive it. I thanked him for his generosity and headed to my final destination.

My visits to the Tibetan institutes reveals some interesting parallels between the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom and the two Tibetan educational institutions. There does not seem to be a desire for more visitors. While the garden is mostly interested in the *right* visitors that would help enhance its positive image, the educational institutions are part of a network that does not require economic revenue from development of the tourist industry. The Central Institute of Higher Tibetan Studies, for instance, is fully funded by the Government of India. Its value is in its academic offerings, and its significance as the only Tibetan university in the country. Perhaps, the lesser crowds in Sarnath make it an ideal place for studying and monastic training. Indeed, this is the place where the Buddha taught his first sermon.

Sarnath Excavated Archaeological Site, Anagarika Dharmapala Museum and Mini Zoo

Throughout my fieldwork, I noticed that there was some tension between domestic tourists and those employed at several Buddhist sites. My observations at the excavated site and the Sarnath “zoo” uncovered some other conflicts that I had not noticed previously, mainly pointing to a conflict between the devout Buddhists and the government workers. As I briefly mentioned earlier, one of the main reasons for the absence of the ancient ruins on the World Heritage List is due to the poor planning and management of the site. The site includes the ruins of the ancient Mulagandha Kuti Vihara temple complex and various other votive stupas. Due to its archaeological,

historical, and religious significance, the site is among the most popular in the town. In comparison to all the other monuments and temples I visited, the highest number of Buddhist monks and pilgrims, as well as international and domestic tourists were present here. There was a striking difference in the ways in which the different groups were experiencing the site. For instance, I noticed that most of the domestic tourists were using the various ruins as walkways or picnic tables.²²⁷ There was only one security guard and he would periodically tell them to leave, but his efforts were mostly ineffective. The Buddhist pilgrims were also monitored and there were numerous signs that prohibited any Buddhist ritual at the site. As the picture below illustrates, these warnings were also ignored.



Figure 13. The photo shows candle wax that had not been cleaned up since Buddha Jayanti celebrations in May 2017. The signs clearly indicate that incense and candles are prohibited, and request that golden foils should not be stuck on the walls. However, this has not prevented devout Buddhists from praying and performing rituals.

²²⁷ I want to note here that I think that this behavior may not be intentionally disrespectful towards Buddhists, since I have noticed this behavior at many revered Hindu sites as well.

The international tourists mainly focused on taking pictures and some did comment that a lot of the ruins need to be barricaded to help preserve this “ancient treasure.” These comments and signs directed at Buddhists indicate that the site needs to be respected, but also protected from religious activity. Additionally, Singh argues that the control by ASI has resulted in conflict, and that in 2007, a petition was signed demanding “that the Government reconsider its total dominance of the site and share administration by way of creating a Managing Committee comprising of Indian Buddhists as well as offering Buddhist pilgrims from all over the world the liberty to perform their rituals over a period of days or weeks and to stop charging an entrance fee.”²²⁸ Furthermore, the petition states that “all one can see at Sarnath are busloads of tourists being given a guided tour. At most they may spend an hour or two chanting... nothing more... the site has been deprived of its spiritual relevance by a very short-sighted Governmental Administrative system.”²²⁹ This suggests that, while the Government of Uttar Pradesh is shifting its focus to the Buddhist Circuit for economic gain, the religious aspect of the site has not been completely recognized.

The mini zoo, which the manager at the Garden of Spiritual of Wisdom referred to as the “dirty” park, is located in a section of the Deer Park that is not protected by the management of the Sarnath Excavated Archaeological Site. The Deer Park is a revered place for many Buddhists, but I noticed that the zoo was poorly maintained.²³⁰ Moreover,

²²⁸ Rana PB Singh, "Heritage Contestation and Context of Religion: Political Scenario from Southern Asia," *Politics and Religion Journal* 2, no. 1 (2017): 89.

²²⁹ This petition was written by Dr. Suresh Bhatia, who started the Buddhist Heritage Research Foundation in 2000. The petition is on-going, and no results have been announced. See Suresh Bhatia, "Liberate the Sacred Buddhist Site at Sarnath," <https://www.gopetition.com/petitions/liberate-the-sacred-buddhist-site-at-sarnath.html>.

²³⁰ Despite the entrance fees, the park was unkempt, and many visitors were calling it a “rip-off.” Most international tourists I spoke with were appalled by the entrance fees and that the “zoo” only had one

I did not notice any Buddhists at this site. Hereafter, I learned that there were a number of Buddhists that were unhappy with its condition and exploitation.

When I arrived at the Anagarika Dharmapala Museum, I had the honor of speaking to Lobsang.²³¹ He was quite pleased to see that he had a visitor and asked me about my research. After our conversation, I asked him how he felt about the lack of information and awareness, as well the state of the Deer Park (the excavated site and the mini zoo). Lobsang explained that many of the other Buddhists, especially those associated with the Maha Bodhi Society, were unhappy with the appropriation of the site. He also stated that despite the efforts of Dharmapala, there is a lack of Buddhist authority at Sarnath since most groups are disconnected. He was saddened by the way the Deer Park was being maintained and even though he did not mention the entrance fees, it was implied that the government's efforts were mostly viewed as covetous and unsympathetic towards the religious significance of the site.

The "Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018" document specifically states that one of the project's objectives is to "improve quality of experience while respecting, preserving, and enhancing the religious value and significance of the sites." However, on the last day of my fieldwork, I learned that the conflicts at Sarnath went beyond the strain between the locals and domestic tourists, and the disengagement between the tourist and pilgrimage systems. The lack of organization and preservation of the ancient ruins (the excavated site) and the Deer Park has not necessarily progressed to the same extent that

wilting lotus, a crocodile, some local birds, and three deer. The entrance fees at the local zoo were as follows, Indian: Rs.10, Asian foreigner: Rs.25, and Other foreigner: Rs.50.

²³¹ The administrator of the Anagarika Dharmapala Museum, whom I will refer to as Lobsang for the dissemination of the thesis.

the Mahabodhi Temple Complex has. Nonetheless, it indicates a rejection of tourism by the locals and the devout Buddhists. It seems that while the various temples are maintained by their respective national organizations, the most sacred spaces and monuments fall under the government's administration. While the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom stands as a testimony of collaboration between Government of Uttar Pradesh and seemingly Japanese patrons, the unwillingness of the manager to reveal the donor's identity suggests some tension between the government workers, the locals, and the Buddhist organizations.

Conclusion

Sarnath has long been excluded from the State Government's developmental projects aimed at enhancing Buddhist pilgrimage sites until recently. In accordance with the Incredible India Campaign, the Government of India, the state governments, and the Ministry of Tourism have collaborated to market various aspects of India that brand it as the ultimate global destination where tourists can experience something that is indescribable. Part of these campaigns has focused on spiritual, religious and wellness tourism. Since India is home to many different religious pilgrimage sites, these have also been incorporated in marketing India as a place of spirituality and bliss. While Bihar has successfully branded itself as "Blissful Bihar," the promotion of Buddhist pilgrimage sites in Uttar Pradesh is lagging behind.

The "Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018" document recognizes some of the impeding factors that have affected tourism in Sarnath. During my fieldwork in Sarnath, I recognized many of these, including lack of information and awareness, poor management at the tourism information center, and a division among the primary

stakeholders. These attitudes may represent a rejection of the state's plans, as well as haphazard planning by ASI and Government of Bihar. For instance, the light and sound show has been delayed since 2002 and has yet to materialize. The control of the excavated archaeological site has created some conflict between the devout Buddhists and the state officials. Furthermore, the tourist officers did not seem to think that Sarnath is a valuable tourist site, and very few of the souvenir vendors identified their jobs in the tourist industry as a primary source of income. There was also some noticeable conflict between the locals employed at Buddhist sites and domestic travelers.

In regards to infrastructure development in Sarnath, I contend that the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom signals progress and Government of Uttar Pradesh's increased interest in Sarnath. The site is well-maintained and complies with the developmental projects set forth since the Incredible India campaign. However, the commercialization of spirituality and Buddhism has consequences that go beyond the project's success. The ancient ruins of Sarnath, for instance, still remain on the tentative list twenty years since its nomination. Furthermore, the government's management of the excavated site ironically attempts to preserve the site, while rejecting its living religious significance to devout Buddhists who wish to continue to conduct rituals at this sacred space. The juxtaposition between the efforts of conservation and commercialized promotion of Buddhist pilgrimage and spirituality has led to contestations between the devout Buddhists, the locals, and the government officials. On one hand, the rejection of the state government's efforts at tourism development has been an impeding factor in infrastructure development. On the other hand, the presence of government authority has resulted in dissatisfaction among the devout Buddhists who live there. Furthermore, despite the

assertion that promotion of tourism, specifically the Buddhist Circuit, will bring in more economic revenue, most of the Indian residents do not recognize the tourist sector in Sarnath as a primary source of income. These differing interests and motivations require further examination. In comparison to UP, the state of Bihar has rebranded itself as “Blissful Bihar,” and its identity as a Buddhist state has led to more development projects aimed at improving infrastructure to accommodate international tourists and pilgrims. As the “navel of the earth” and the site of the Buddha’s enlightenment, a comparative study between Sarnath and Bodhgaya is essential to understand the relationship between the commercialization of Buddhist sites by Government of India and its impact on the Buddhist sites.

Blissful Bihar: Enhancing Global Tourism in Bodhgaya

I am the history of India. I gave the world its first Republic. I nourished Buddha to enlightenment. I gave the world its best ancient university... My son Ashoka – The Great was the greatest ruler of India...I gave Ashoka Chakra that adorns India’s national flag...I am the land of festivals. I am brotherhood. I am humility. I am the past. I am the future. I am opportunity. I am revolution. I am culture. I am *heritage*. I am intellect. I am farmer. I am power. I am literature. I am poetry. I am love. I am heart. I am soul. I am yoga. I am *global*. I am inspiration. I am freedom. I am force. I am destiny. I am Bihar...Come with your dream. I will make it a reality [emphasis added].

- Mayank Krishna, “I am Bihar,” BlissfulBihar Blog Website, 2009²³²

Earlier scholarship on Bodhgaya mostly focused on the Hindu and Buddhist conflict surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple, and the reinvention of the temple under the British rule. Although these matters were temporarily resolved via the Bodhgaya Temple Management Act in 1949, the Mahabodhi Temple still stands as a site of intense negotiations and contestation.²³³ Since the 2500th Buddha Jayanti celebrations in 1956, Bodhgaya’s link to Buddhism has played an important role in fostering a relationship between the Government of India and other Southeast Asian and East Asian countries. However, since 2002, the Government of India and the Ministry of Tourism have primarily focused on Bodhgaya’s potential to drive economic development through tourism.²³⁴ Bodhgaya has since become a site of contestation between those who see it as a place of Buddhist pilgrimage, and those who view it as a

²³² Mayank Krishna, "I am Bihar," <http://www.blissfulbihar.com/i-am-bihar>. The original poem, first published by the author on blogspot.com, is shaped in the form of a *pipal* tree. This aesthetic choice reflects the rebranding of Bihar as a culturally rich state that has a deep connection with Buddhism and enlightenment.

²³³ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism," 170.

²³⁴ Robert C. Pryor, "Bodh Gaya in the 1950s: Jawaharlal Nehru, Mahant Giri, and Anagarika Munindra," In *Cross-disciplinary perspectives on a contested Buddhist site: Bodh Gaya Jataka*, ed. David Geary, Matthew R Sayers, and Abhishek Singh Amar (New York: Routledge, 2012), 115.

tourist site.²³⁵

There were two events in 2002, as argued by Geary, which have been major catalysts in accelerating the “growing internationalization of the site and the development of religious-based tourism:” the declaration of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a UNESCO World Heritage Site (WHS), and the completion of the Gaya International Airport.²³⁶ The latter was an important development since it allowed pilgrims to travel safely to Bodhgaya, thus making the site more accessible. UNESCO recognition of the Mahabodhi Temple was widely celebrated by Buddhists around the world; this event symbolized the significance of Bodhgaya and placed it on a global map.²³⁷ The designation of Bodhgaya as a WHS also made it the first ‘living site’ to be given this status.²³⁸

Bodhgaya: The Site of Buddhist Heritage

One of the issues indicated in the “Pilgrimage Rejuvenation and Spiritual Augmentation Drive” document, published by the Ministry of Tourism and Government of India, was that the branding of the Buddhist Circuit in Uttar Pradesh was lacking. On the other hand, the branding of “Blissful Bihar” and the designation of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex by UNESCO have helped elevate Bihar’s image as a Buddhist destination. The emergence of the World Heritage Site designation has

²³⁵ Pryor, "Bodh Gaya in the 1950s," 114.

²³⁶ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism," 13.

²³⁷ Jacob Kinnard, "The Ambiguities of Preservation: Bodhgayā, UNESCO, and the Making of a World Heritage Site," In *Religious Representation in Place* (Springer, 2014), 235.

²³⁸ The Government of India’s WHS application indicates that “The Mahabodhi Temple is a living monument where people from all over the world even today throng to offer reverential prayers to the Buddha.” Also see Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism."

become one of the most successful brand names in the international tourism market.²³⁹ This coveted status gives the site a “stamp of quality and authenticity,” and places it on a list of global icons that can represent their respective countries.²⁴⁰ These sites are then marketed by the nations as tourist destinations. For a long time, the Taj Mahal has been advertised by the Government of India and Ministry of Tourism as “India’s brand ambassador” and the “ultimate symbol of love.”²⁴¹ Moreover, the Incredible India campaign has diligently advertised the Taj Mahal as “the most photographed monument on the planet.”²⁴²

However, heritage sites that are designated by UNESCO must meet a series of requirements for planning and management. This can lead to some conflict because destination branding, especially in the context of heritage sites, is a “highly politicized activity” that involves many diverse stakeholders with a wide variety of differing interests.²⁴³ These stakeholders may include the local, regional, national, and international parties, including the national government, the state government, the department of tourism, and various private businesses that provide services around these heritage sites.²⁴⁴ A closer look at the nomination application, for instance, reveals several inter-related visions that seem to be in tension with each other.²⁴⁵

²³⁹ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 47.

²⁴⁰ Aleksandr Michelson and Katrin Paadam, "Destination branding and reconstructing symbolic capital of urban heritage: A spatially informed observational analysis in medieval towns," *Journal of Destination Marketing & Management* 5, no. 2 (2016): 141.

²⁴¹ Surajit Chakravarty and Clara Irazábal, "Golden Geese or White Elephants? The Paradoxes of World Heritage Sites and Community-Based Tourism Development in Agra, India," *Community Development* 42, no. 3 (2011): 362.

²⁴² "Incredible India Campaign," Incredibleindiacampaign.com.

²⁴³ Jason Ryan and Sari Silvano, "A Brand for all the Nations: The Development of the World Heritage Brand in Emerging Markets," *Marketing Intelligence & Planning* 29, no. 3 (2011): 310.

²⁴⁴ Ryan and Silvano, "A Brand for all the Nations," 310.

²⁴⁵ See Jacob N Kinnard, *Places in Motion: The Fluid Identities Of Temples, Images, and Pilgrims* (Oxford University Press, 2014).

The nomination application for the recognition of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a WHS site was proposed by Aswani Lohani, Director of the Ministry of Tourism, and prepared by Benoy K. Behl, a consultant from the Ministry of Tourism. The support of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee, ASI, the Bihar State Tourism Development Corporation was essential to the project.²⁴⁶ In the WHS nomination application, the Mahabodhi Temple is listed as a site with “universal” value. It states that “the Mahabodhi Temple Complex has outstanding universal importance as it is one of the most revered and sanctified places in the world.” However, there are some ambiguities regarding what the document means by “universal:” Whose heritage is being preserved?²⁴⁷ Defining a heritage site, especially a contested site like Bodhgaya, is not an easy task. According to Graham, Tunbridge and Ashworth, dissonance is intrinsically created when something takes on the status of a heritage site. Moreover, dissonance acknowledges the inevitability that the *meaning* of these places will be challenged and contested.²⁴⁸

Any natural or cultural heritage site must comply with two important requirements to be included on the World Heritage List. First, the site must be identified as having “outstanding universal value,” and secondly, the nominating nation-state must indicate a management plan that will “ensure the long-term survival of values recognized by UNESCO.”¹⁸ In order to meet the criteria set by UNESCO, the conflicting interpretations had to be swept aside in favor of universality and mass

²⁴⁶ See David Geary, (University of British Columbia, 2009), 202.

²⁴⁷ Note that the temple is not only a significant monument for Buddhists since many Hindus have made claims to the temple as well. There is also the question about *whose* Buddhism is being regarded as “universal” here.

²⁴⁸ Brian Graham, Greg Ashworth, and John Tunbridge, *A Geography of Heritage* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 24.

tourism. The requirements also put pressure on the government officials to “clean up” the area surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple and enforce zoning laws which would regulate religious and commercial activity at the site.²⁴⁹

Soon after the announcement of the UNESCO designation, the Gaya District Magistrate, the chairman of the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC) and the Magadh District Commissioner announced plans to preserve the site, which also included the development of the surrounding area. H.C. Sirohi, the District Commissioner, suggested that the development plans would bring an end to suffering for all. “This is going to be the most beautiful and tourist-friendly holy place. Not a single individual will suffer,” he claimed.²⁵⁰ By utilizing a Buddhist concept, *dukkha* (suffering), Sirohi hoped to address the concerns of many of the residents and Buddhist inhabitants of the area regarding the impact of the new laws that would govern the land surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple Complex.

The development projects are focused on two aspects: meditation-religious, and tourist attraction. Although the plans seem to indicate a holistic approach, conserving the temple while simultaneously promoting tourism seems to raise some problems for those who either reside in Bodhgaya or those who see this site as sacred. As Geary states, many stakeholders have criticized the development plans.²⁵¹ In order to meet UNESCO’s guidelines, a buffer zone of 1-kilometer radius from the Mahabodhi Temple was proposed in the application. Other plans included demarcating areas

²⁴⁹ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 165-66.

²⁵⁰ Farzand Ahmed, "Decision to Declare Mahabodhi Temple a World Heritage Site creates confusion in Bodhgaya," *India Today* 2002, <https://www.indiatoday.in/magazine/heritage/story/20020715-decision-to-declare-mahabodhi-temple-a-world-heritage-site-creates-confusion-in-bodhgaya-794921-2002-07-15>.

²⁵¹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism," 14.

around the temple:

To provide for movement of people, taking into account the building of the proposed Museum of Buddhism, the Archaeological parks and other facilities for visitors such as bus terminals, parking, shopping, food, and entertainment facilities for tourists and devotees.

The authors of the WHS application recognized that there are existing temples, monasteries, and accommodations located in the buffer zone, and indicate that no *new* structures will be permitted in the area. However, there was a lot of confusion among some of the Buddhist groups that were excluded from the decision-making process, and many of the shopkeepers and vendors were threatened by the state government's plans to eradicate the market surrounding the Mahabodhi Temple.²⁵²

Kinnard identifies three overlapping visions that emerge in the WHS application: the "outstanding universal value" vision, the "living temple vision," and the last vision: "Bodhgaya as a tourist site."²⁵³ These conflicting visions led to controversy regarding foreign Buddhist ritual activities and the rampant commercialism of a sacred site. The government officials, on the other hand, were concerned that the Mahabodhi Temple Complex may get listed on the *List of World Heritage in Danger* only three years after its official designation, and most importantly, that the buffer zone must be implemented to "preserve the peace."²⁵⁴ With the emergence of new hotels, monasteries, guest houses and shops near the Mahabodhi Temple, the complaints against noise pollution, alcohol, drug use, and other illegal

²⁵² Ahmed, "Decision to declare Mahabodhi Temple."

²⁵³ Kinnard, *Places in Motion*, 126. According to Kinnard, this vision is concerned with restoring Bodhgaya to its "original" state, so that the temple would be "fixed." He also notes that this is a somewhat reluctant vision, and it identifies the temple as a place of religious relevance for Buddhists and Hindus.

²⁵⁴ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 21.

activities also increased.²⁵⁵

In 2005, there was a two-day protest organized by the shopkeepers, landowners, and concerned citizens, who objected to the proposed Master Plan that placed restrictions on construction in the buffer zone. According to Geary, many of the protestors were worried that the land would be given to foreigners and that the government's decision would lead to the displacement of the residents of Bodhgaya.²⁵⁶ These protests, as Geary notes, only highlighted some of the issues surrounding claims to cultural heritage sites.

Bodhgaya: The Master Plan

Since India's independence in 1947, several policies have been implemented both at the state and local level to ensure the preservation of the Mahabodhi Temple. Under the 1949 *Bodhgaya Temple Act*, the state government had the authority to form an advisory committee that consisted of mostly non-Indian Buddhists.²⁵⁷ Jawaharlal Nehru and Bihar's chief minister, Sinha, hoped that the inclusion of "non-Indian" Buddhists would help facilitate a relationship with other Asian countries and "benefit India economically and politically." In his letter to his private secretary, Nehru wrote:

It would be desirable to give a certain international character to this temple... [that] would have no executive authority or power that will nevertheless be helpful and will be a graceful gesture to the Buddhist world (Nehru 1949, 607).²⁵⁸

In 1956, the state government and the Government of India implemented

²⁵⁵Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 21.

²⁵⁶ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 147-48.

²⁵⁷ "Perspective Development Plan for Bodhgaya under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission," ed. Department of Urban Development (Government of Bihar, 2006), 40.

²⁵⁸ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 40-41.

national development schemes to improve transportation and tourist facilities for the thousands of foreign Buddhists who were to visit India to celebrate the 2500th Buddha Jayanti. As part of this plan, Bodhgaya's sewage system and roads were improved, and a government rest house, a tourist dormitory, an archaeological museum, a state government bungalow, and several gardens were constructed. To turn the surrounding area of the temple into gardens, some of the residents were relocated to a nearby government settlement. Since then, the government encouraged archaeological excavations and repair in and around the temple to "reinforce the temple's Buddhist authenticity."²⁵⁹

The idea of a "Master Plan" was first carried out after the 1949 *Bodhgaya Temple Act*, and it has been in flux ever since.²⁶⁰ The first "Draft Master Plan" was prepared by the Bodhgaya Town Planning Authority in 1966. Its objectives included:

- A. The preservation of the Maha Bodhi Temple Vista from the approach road.
- B. The enhancement of serenity and aesthetic beauty within the Temple sector and generally within the whole town.
- C. Convenience of access to sites hallowed by the Lord during his meditations in Uru Vilva Vana (an enchanting forest land then covering the present town and environs).
- D. Needs of tourist homes, camping grounds, monasteries and rest-houses, meditation, recreational and symbolic parks, etc.
- E. Preservation of archaeological areas for excavation.
- F. Needs of the resident local populations.
- G. Local-regional needs due to the town's function as a service-centre and the seat of rural (block) administration.
- H. The needs of the Magadh University and its co-relation with other requirements.
- I. The crucial importance of maintaining a rural economic base and, therefore, of conservation of land, intensive cultivation and rural industrialisation.
- J. The crucial importance of its retention as a small town, for, as Sir Patrick

²⁵⁹ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 150.

²⁶⁰ Jason Rodriguez, "Cleaning Up Bodhgaya: Conflicts over Development and the Worlding of Buddhism," *City & Society* 29, no. 1 (2017): 68.

Abercombie – a noted town planner – puts it, “then its amenities and attributes are more readily grasped and assimilated.”

K. Assimilation of the overall town development of the Gaya-Manpur-Bodh Gaya complex.²⁶¹

Since 1995, as part of India’s modernist movement, there was an increasing interest in important spaces, which would directly reflect the *image* of the nation-state. These upper-class concerns mainly included improvement in aesthetics, leisure, health, and safety. Bodhgaya, which has always been a significant space, was now part of the Nehruvian nationalist movement, which focused on “functional separation... leaving a sanitised slot for history in the form of protection of monuments deemed archaeologically important.”²⁶² Implicit in this “Draft Master Plan” is the nostalgic sense that somehow Bodhgaya will be returned to its peaceful state. These objectives were carried forward in the “Revised Master Plan” in 1973, which covered a period of 13 years (1973-1986). One of its new directives included a provision earmarking a 19-acre site “to be acquired by the government for the rehabilitation of Taradih village.”²⁶³ One of the implications of this provision was the removal of the occupants of Taradih and their relocation to a new site named Bhagalpur or New Taradih. At the time, “the removal of the village and the acquisition of the 1km buffer zone had... become a priority for the state government and regional authorities.”²⁶⁴ As a result, as many as 380 homes in Taradih were bulldozed in 1980, and in 1982, the newly vacant 17-acre plot was to become a “Tourist complex.”²⁶⁵ The Gautam Van (Buddha forest) Tourist

²⁶¹ Details found in Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 155.

²⁶² Amita Baviskar, "Between Violence and Desire: Space, Power, and Identity in The Making of Metropolitan Delhi," *International Social Science Journal* 55, no. 175 (2003): 90.

²⁶³ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 162. The Taridh village was one of the “revenue” villages for the Bodhgaya Math.

²⁶⁴ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 156.

²⁶⁵ Searcy, "Tourism, Pilgrimage and Development," 30.

Complex would include gardens, ponds, artificial streams and tourist cottages, however, this project never came to fruition.²⁶⁶

Since then, the development plans for Bodhgaya have stressed the need for a greenbelt around the Mahabodhi Temple Complex, which was originally proposed in the “Draft Master Plan” of 1966. The most recent plan, “Perspective Development Plan for Bodhgaya under the Jawaharlal Nehru National Urban Renewal Mission” (JNNURM) or “Vision 2005-2031,” has outlined “the policies for developing Bodhgaya as a ‘World Buddhist Centre,’ a green, healthy town with equitable social opportunity for all and a pilgrim destination that provides glimpses of the land of enlightenment as it used to be in the time of the Buddha.” The objectives of this plan are as follows:

- a) To provide balanced and equitable development which improves the quality of life for the residents.
- b) To protect and conserve the historical, cultural and archaeological fabric of the town.
- c) To promote environmentally sensitive socio-economic development that look after the concerns of all sections of the community
- d) To provide a framework in which Bodhgaya can develop as a world Buddhist centre and a centre of learning

The JNNURM document notes that despite the objectives regarding development listed in the “Master Plan 1991-2001,” Bodhgaya “developed in gross ignorance of the Master Plan proposals.” The document also lists some of the factors that have hindered development in Bodhgaya, including poor urban infrastructure, lack of preservation and protection of heritage resources, congestion and haphazard

²⁶⁶ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 157-58.

development around the Mahabodhi Temple, inadequate provision of health and recreation facilities, poor quality roads, and poor implementation of policies from the earlier Master Plans. The uncontrolled development of hotels, guest houses, and unauthorized shops are listed as major concerns since they affect the spiritual ambience that was part of the WHS application. This document was formulated by the Housing and Urban Development Corporation (HUDCO) in conjunction with the Ministry of Tourism, monks and ambassadors from Asia, the Bodhgaya Temple Advisory Board, the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee (BTMC), and a few others considered to be important stakeholders. The authors of the document recognize that the designation of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a World Heritage Site should be the primary focus for attracting international tourists. Furthermore, several projects have been implemented for the enhancement of the site: development of a cultural and crafts centre, camping sites, the regional tourist circuit, and skill- training of local women and youth.

In February 2004, an ‘International Conclave on Buddhism and Spiritual Tourism’ was held in New Delhi and Bodhgaya respectively.²⁶⁷ During the meeting, Kant insisted that despite its advantages, “India is not taking sufficient advantage of its treasure of holy sites relating to the life and times of Lord Buddha.”²⁶⁸ The conclave, which consisted of 400 devotees from over 25 different countries, concluded that the Government of India should appoint a high- level commission to look into the state of the Buddhist ancient pilgrimage sites and take measures to restore them.²⁶⁹ At the

²⁶⁷ Singh, "Exile and Return: The Reinvention of Buddhism and Buddhist Sites in Modern India," 204.

²⁶⁸ Kant, *Branding India*, 116.

²⁶⁹ The closing ceremonies took place at the Mahabodhi Temple, and the Dalai Lama was present at this conclave as the keynote speaker.

meeting, Jagmohan Malhotra, India's tourism minister at the time, "announced plans to develop Bodhgaya into an international destination and promised infrastructure and facilities to develop its tourism sector. 'We are grateful to UNESCO that they responded to our request and have given the status of World Heritage to the Mahabodhi Temple. This has put Buddha Gaya on the world map,' he announced."²⁷⁰

The recognition of the poor infrastructure and the lack of amenities for tourists have been noted as impeding factors for the development of the tourism sector in both Bodhgaya and Sarnath. Moreover, there is a focus on greenery, peace, and ambience that are reflected in the development plans of Bodhgaya and the promotion of the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom in Sarnath. The upper-class concerns of the environmental bourgeois under the Nehruvian movement have trickled down since the "master plan" was first envisioned in the mid-1900s. The Master Plan and the Buddhist involvement in Bodhgaya, however, have continued to make claims over this "sacred geography of Buddhism."²⁷¹ By relocating the street vendors and other unauthorized businesses, the HUDCO and the government's plan for development and "cleaning up" Bodhgaya conveniently overlapped with some of the Buddhists' hopes to relieve the sacred space surrounding the temple from commercialism.²⁷²

The protests in 2005 were led by the Nagrik Vikas Manch as a result of this latest Master Plan.²⁷³ This group included many of the citizens, shopkeepers and landowners who were concerned about their displacement and eviction. Some of the

²⁷⁰ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 168.

²⁷¹ Rodriguez, "Cleaning Up Bodhgaya," 64.

²⁷² Rodriguez, "Cleaning Up Bodhgaya," 69.

²⁷³ The group of protestors were also joined by the Bodhgaya Citizen Forum. See Rodriguez, "Cleaning Up Bodhgaya."

concerned residents indicated that they were not included in the decision, and that the government is only interested in giving their land to foreigners.²⁷⁴ The local residents were not the only ones concerned about the negative impact of the new master plan, there were also differences of opinions among the Buddhists, and certain Buddhist groups (Burmese Buddhists and Dalit Buddhists) were strong supporters during the protests.²⁷⁵

Despite some of the criticisms and protests against the development plans in Bodhgaya, the Government of Bihar has invested in beautifying the surroundings of the temple, and “[preserving] the glory of the past.”²⁷⁶ The future of Bodhgaya as a destination for international tourism includes an 18-hole golf course and golf cottages, which was proposed by the UK-based Professional Golfers’ Association.²⁷⁷ The state government has since asked for assistance from private funds for the construction of the golf resort. The goal of the state government is to sell the different cottages to various wealthy Buddhists from Thailand, South Korea, Japan, Taiwan and Sri Lanka since meditation and golf are prevalent there.²⁷⁸ The justification behind this project was that the presence of a golf course would enable more greenery in the area, and the hotels and other facilities would create more jobs, and it would “enter Bodhgaya into the global market.”²⁷⁹

As Geary suggests, “Bodh Gaya is a site that generates universal value only in

²⁷⁴ Geary, *The Rebirth of Bodh Gaya*, 147.

²⁷⁵ Rodriguez, "Cleaning Up Bodhgaya," 73.

²⁷⁶ Ahmed, "Decision to declare Mahabodhi Temple."

²⁷⁷ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism," 13-14.

²⁷⁸ David Geary, "Buddhist Circuits and Worlding Practices in North India," In *The Making of Heritage: Seduction and Disenchantment*, ed. Camila Del Marmol, Marc Morell, and Jasper Chalcraft (New York: Routledge, 2015), 46.

²⁷⁹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Branding Buddhism," 14.

relation to its Buddhist past and its continuity in terms of ritual activity today.”²⁸⁰ On the other hand, the “universal designation” from UNESCO conveniently allowed the State Government to silence or regulate forms of dissonance and contestation.²⁸¹ The new image of Bodhgaya then became ironically packaged with both modernity and traces of its Buddhist past. The transnational presence of Buddhism in the country, and its image as a peaceful religion makes it an ideal focus for branding the “new” Bihar. Images of Buddhist heritage and spiritual tourism have been synchronized with the Incredible India campaign, and have become important tools for gaining global capital and countering negative stereotypes about Bihar.

Buddhist Bihar, Blissful Bihar

During the three-day ‘International Buddhist Conclave (IBC) 2012,’ the tourism ministers from Uttar Pradesh and Bihar were aware that Bihar had been more successful in attracting tourists to its Buddhist sites. Sunil Kumar Pintu, then Bihar’s Minister of Tourism, reported that “improvement in basic infrastructure” was the driving force in Bihar’s success.²⁸² While the lack of basic amenities during my fieldwork in Sarnath would be an ideal example of Sarnath’s economic stagnation, I want to stress that the completion of the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom and the inauguration of the ‘International Buddhist Conclave 2016’ in Sarnath, indicate that the site of Buddha’s first sermon is gaining significance on UP’s Buddhist Circuit.

However, Uttar Pradesh Tourism has greatly advertised Varanasi as an

²⁸⁰ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 205.

²⁸¹ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 224.

²⁸² "Government plans to promote Buddhist sites as new tourist hotspots," *Times of India*, 2012, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/varanasi/Government-plans-to-promote-Buddhist-sites-as-new-tourist-hotspots/articleshow/16608900.cms>.

important pilgrimage site for religious and spiritual tourist-pilgrims alike. This, in turn, has overshadowed some of the Buddhist pilgrimage sites located in Uttar Pradesh. Bihar, on the other hand, has primarily focused on its Buddhist Circuit in comparison to other religious circuits.²⁸³ While the development of the Buddhist Circuit in UP is quite recent, Bihar has been actively campaigning its identity as “Blissful Bihar” since 2005. In correlation with the feeling of nostalgia and intrigue invoked by the UP Tourism campaign for Varanasi, Bihar emphasized its significance as the site of ancient heritage, as a land of knowledge, and as the birthplace of Buddhism. The logo for Bihar Tourism includes the *pipal* tree, the tree under which the Buddha attained enlightenment. The BlissfulBihar blog, administered by Ajit Chouhan, uses an image of the Buddha sitting in the *bhumisparsha mudra* (earth-touching gesture), which resonates with the image of the Buddha in the Mahabodhi temple. More importantly, this *mudra* is location-specific; calling earth as his witness, it symbolizes the Buddha’s triumph over obstacles and his enlightenment at Bodhgaya.²⁸⁴ Hence, the aesthetic choice of the *pipal* tree and the earth-touching gesture are also important symbols that elevate Bodhgaya’s status as the most important pilgrimage site for Buddhists worldwide.

Prior to its marketing as a cultural treasure, Bihar was notoriously known for its poverty, backwardness, and lawlessness as specified in the Introduction. However,

²⁸³ In 2014, with the appointment of a new tourism minister, Bihar’s development plans were renewed to showcase the Jain, Sufi, and Hindu circuits in addition to the Buddhist Circuit. For more information, see “State at work to develop every tourist spot, minister says,” *Times of India*, 2014, <https://timesofindia.indiatimes.com/city/patna/State-at-work-to-develop-every-tourist-spot-minister-says/articleshow/43355595.cms>.

²⁸⁴ Rana PB Singh and Devesh Kumar, “Bodh Gaya, a World Heritage Site: Tourists’ and Natives’ Perceptions of Heritage and its Value,” In *Heritagescapes and Cultural Landscapes*, ed. Rana PB Singh (New Delhi: Shubhi Publications, 2011), 256.

the government has rebranded Bihar as a global destination, while emphasizing its historical, cultural, and archaeological ties to a broader, transnational community. In the popular imagination, Buddhism is associated with non- violence, meditation, peace, and harmony. The image of the Buddha – silently sitting under a tree, his eyes slightly closed, smiling compassionately – evokes certain elements that counteract Bodhgaya’s negative image. Moreover, Bihar’s tourism campaign does not limit itself to Bodhgaya; Nalanda, Sanchi, Vaishali, and Patna have been greatly marketed as well.²⁸⁵ Especially since its coveted status as a World Heritage Site in 2016, the archaeological site of Nalanda *Mahavihara* (Nalanda University) in Bihar has been included in the Incredible India ad campaigns.²⁸⁶



Figure 14. Image shows the archaeological ruins of the Nalanda University. Source: Incredible!ndia Twitter feed 2017.

²⁸⁵ The Great Stupa, located in Sanchi (in the state of Madhya Pradesh), is one of the oldest and largest stupas in India and is attributed to emperor Asoka.

²⁸⁶ For more information, including site specific details on the evaluation of the cultural property see: "Archaeological Site of Nalanda Mahavihara at Nalanda, Bihar," <https://whc.unesco.org/en/list/1502>.

For Bihar Tourism, the main attraction is the possibility of indescribable experience that comes from visiting its religious Buddhist sites. Images of non-Indian monks have been primarily showcased throughout the Incredible India campaign. The main objective of these Incredible India ads was to re-establish “the nation’s self-image [by elevating] ... Bihar’s Buddhist heritage.”²⁸⁷ Additionally, the images of Bihar in the Incredible India campaign have helped rebrand its image as a destination for spiritual experience and enlightenment, which further emphasizes the campaign’s initial experiential approach towards global tourism marketing.

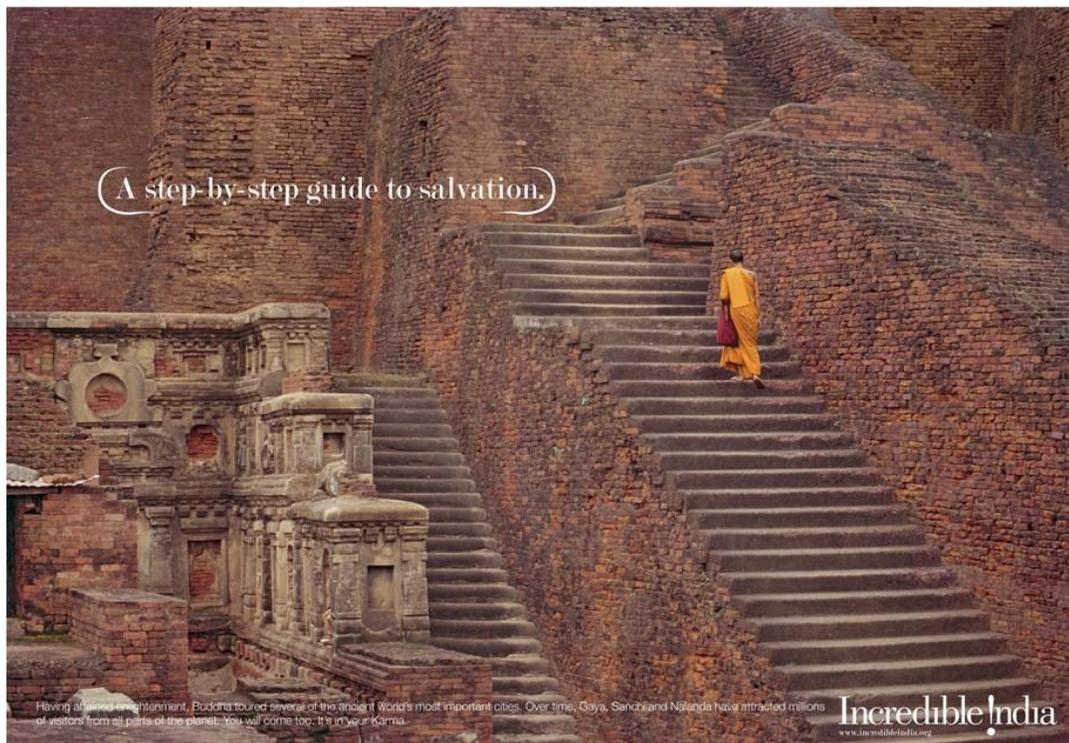


Figure 15. Incredible India Campaign 2006/2007. The subtext reads, “Having attained enlightenment, Buddha toured several of the ancient world’s most important cities. Over time, Gaya, Sanchi and Nalanda have attracted millions of visitors from all parts of the planet. You will come too. It’s in your Karma.”

Source: <http://www.incredibleindiacampaign.com/campaign2007.html>

There was a remarkable shift in the Incredible India Campaign in 2007, which

²⁸⁷ Geary, "Incredible India in a Global Age," 42.

aimed to move past the orientalist tropes utilized in marketing campaigns in its earlier stages. The ad shown above is only one of the examples from the 2006/2007 campaign. Many of the ads included witty subtext, but the aim of the campaign was more than humor. As stated by V. Sunil, then Executive Creative Director who conceptualized Incredible India in 2002, the subtext of the ad campaign was “symptomatic of a much bigger social phenomenon i.e. an optimistic and extroverted new India, eager to make its presence felt in the global community.” As a symbol of eternal love, the image of the Taj Mahal included the words “and to think these days men can get away with giving flowers and chocolates to their wives.” Similarly, adventure tourism was advertised as “rising above” work stress or not worrying “because there’s always rebirth.”²⁸⁸ There’s more to note about the ad marketing “salvation” and the birthplace of Buddhism. While the image invokes a sense of peace and spirituality, the specific names of the sites are also forms of commodities that define and shape the consumer’s itineraries and experiences.²⁸⁹ The ad shown earlier recognizes Gaya, Sanchi, and Nalanda as some of the “ancient world’s most important cities.” All these sites are located in Bihar, which also illustrates the prioritization of the Buddhist Circuit in Bihar. It should be noted that the creative team made a conscious choice to use images of non- Indian Buddhists. This decision can be understood in relation with the Ministry of Tourism’s plans for the Buddhist Circuit at the time.

²⁸⁸ Note that the promotion of Adventure Tourism is interconnected with spirituality. For more information, visit <http://incredibleindiacampaign.com/campaign2007.html>

²⁸⁹ David Geary, "India's Buddhist circuit(s): A growing investment market for a "rising" Asia," *International Journal of Religious Tourism and Pilgrimage* 6, no. 1 (2018): 51.



Figure 16. Incredible India Campaign 2007/ 2008. The subtext reads: “Born 563 BC. Enlightened in 528 BC. Great Passing 483 BC. Still lives in millions of hearts. Buddha. The Enlightened One.”

In 2007, the ‘Indo-Japan Cooperation in Tourism’ document was released by the Ministry of Tourism. According to the document, due to Japan’s position as the “top tourists generating market,” the Ministry of Tourism decided to launch an extensive media campaign targeted towards the source markets in East Asia. The ‘Look East Asia Policy’ aimed to attract more tourists interested in India’s Buddhist sites. This decision also led to an interest in UP’s Buddhist Circuit and in 2005, a loan agreement was signed for improving infrastructure at sites like Sarnath, Kushinagar, Kapilavastu, Sravasti, and Sankisa.²⁹⁰ Besides the popularity of the Sri Lankan Temple, Mulagandha Kuti Vihara, the Japanese presence was evident at the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom and the Vishwa Shanti (World Peace) Stupa in Sarnath. Many of the tourism-related investment projects have been funded by Buddhist countries, especially Japan, who

²⁹⁰ Government of India Press Information Bureau, "Indo-Japan Cooperation in Tourism," (2007), <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/erelease.aspx?relid=30231>.

have provided “technical and financial assistance for conservation and infrastructural development projects under the Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund (OECD) and Japan Bank of International Cooperation (JBIC).”²⁹¹ Accordingly, the Government of India and the Ministry of Tourism have utilized India’s cross-border Asian cultural and historical connections that also resonate with its nationalist vision and provide an opportunity for greater investments.

The state government of Bihar understood the importance of UNESCO WHS designation and the potential of attracting international tourists and pilgrims via its links to Buddhism. Consequently, the tourism officials had decided to develop its Buddhist Circuit before focusing on the Sufi or Jain circuits.²⁹² The prioritization of the Buddhist Circuit in Bihar has played an important role in its success. Consequently, although Sarnath witnessed more international and domestic tourists in 2014, 100% of Bihar’s tourist-pilgrims claimed they were interested in visiting the Buddhist Circuit in comparison to Sarnath’s 64%.²⁹³ The success of the Buddhist Circuit has allowed Bihar to shift its focus to other circuits in the recent years; however, its ties to the Buddha’s enlightenment have long been part of Bihar’s identity.²⁹⁴ By re-branding Bihar as “Blissful Bihar” and using the *pipal* tree as its logo, Buddhism has been inextricably intertwined into Bihar’s new image.

Conclusion

Unlike the state of Uttar Pradesh, the government of Bihar has primarily

²⁹¹ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 52.

²⁹² "Centre to Develop Jain, Sufi Tourist Circuits," *The Newswire*, 2012, <https://www.outlookindia.com/newswire/story/centre-to-develop-jain-sufi-tourist-circuits/776773>.

²⁹³ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 48.

²⁹⁴ Since 2014, Bihar Tourism’s social media and ad campaigns have mostly marketed sites related to Jainism, Sufism, Hinduism, and Sikhism. Bihar Tourism’s campaign in 2014 greatly advertised the *chhath* Hindu festival.

focused on its ties to the Buddha's life. Bodhgaya, the site of his enlightenment, has been a site of significance for centuries. However, the coveted status of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a World Heritage Site in 2002 was an important event that triggered the state's efforts to promote its Buddhist Circuit immensely. The master plans and other development projects were aimed at improving infrastructure for attracting international tourists and preserving the ambience and peace that pilgrims may have experienced in the past. The requirements for the maintenance of the UNESCO WHS designation may have encouraged an improvement in facilities, but it is still debatable whether the marketing of the heritage site and the implementation of the buffer zone has had any positive effects on the local residents. Indeed, many have protested in the past and some of the residences and businesses were relocated or destroyed in the last decade.

The new identity of Bihar as "Blissful Bihar," and the advertising campaign under Incredible India have been tools for rebranding Bihar as the land of the Buddha and land of enlightenment. The state and national tourism ministers and the creative directors of the Incredible India campaign and Bihar Tourism have strategically placed Bihar on the global map, while promoting India's ties to a larger transnational Buddhist community. Since 2014, the Ministry of Tourism has extended its promotion of the Buddhist Circuit to other states, including Uttar Pradesh, Jammu Kashmir (Leh and Ladakh), Arunachal Pradesh, Maharashtra, and Andhra Pradesh. The promotion of the Buddhist Circuit by the Government of India has reclaimed Buddhism as one of India's greatest soft powers.

Conclusion

What does luxury mean to you? ...In India, I discovered that true luxury is not something you buy off a shelf. True luxury is a feeling that you are the *maharani* [princess or female sovereign] of your world, and it can all be designed around you. All the beauty is yours, all the music is yours. India showed me that luxury doesn't follow designers and brands. True luxury follows its own heart.

- "The Maharani of Manhattan," Incredible India, 2018

In April 2018, the Indian Railways Catering and Tourism Corporation (IRCTC) announced its first travel programme: 'Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train.' The package promises "high-quality, hassle-free travel itineraries" to its domestic and international travelers and aims to connect major Buddhist centres on the Buddhist Circuit in India and Nepal. The journey is set to last eight days, which begins in Delhi and then heads to Bodhgaya, Varanasi and Sarnath, Nalanda and Rajgir, Lumbini (Nepal), Kushinagar, Sravasti, and then ultimately to visit the Taj Mahal in Delhi, Agra.²⁹⁵ This is the latest addition to Indian government's overall strategy of improving transportation to attract wealthy international Buddhist pilgrims, patrons, and other tourists. The Gaya Airport was inaugurated in 2004 and allowed pilgrims and tourists to travel to Bodhgaya safely. In 2006, the IRCTC introduced *Mahaparinirvan* Express that offered 17 special package trips and promised "world class facilities," including meals, guides, sightseeing tours and hotel accommodations connected to the Buddhist Circuit. This train was fully air-

²⁹⁵ "Buddhist Circuit: IRCTC Latest Tourist Package Covers All Major Cultural Centres," *The Indian Express*, April 16, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/buddhist-circuit-irctc-tourist-train-package-cultural-centres-5138944/>.

conditioned and targeted “middle class and higher end Buddhist tourists, especially from South East Asia, China and Japan.”²⁹⁶

The tourism sector of India and the creation of Special Tourism Zones has led to an increase in Foreign Tourist Arrivals (FTAs) and economic growth. According to *Annual Report 2017-2018*, published by IIC and formulated by the Ministry of Tourism, FTAs in 2017 was 10.18 million with a growth of 15.6% over 2016, which had 8.8 million FTAs, a 9.7% rate growth over 2015. In consultation with the Ministry of Tourism, Rs. 9,450 crore (approximately US \$1.5 billion) have been reserved for India’s 12th Five-Year Plan.²⁹⁷ The overall statistics indicate that India’s tourism sector is thriving in comparison to previous years, and the religious tourism market seems to be a vital part of its economic growth. According to India’s Tourism Department, about 60% of the country’s 740 million domestic travelers went on some sort of pilgrimage or religious travel in 2010. Foreign tourist arrivals, on the other hand, amounted to only 5 million that same year, but the large numbers of Asian pilgrims that travel along the Buddhist Circuit indicate an increase in tourism over previous years.²⁹⁸

As I have shown throughout my thesis, the overall attraction of the Buddhist Circuit cannot be credited to the Government of India and the Ministry of Tourism alone. The sacred geography of the Buddha has existed in the Buddhist imagination for centuries, which precedes the emergence of the modern Indian nation-state. The influx of Buddhist-Asian pilgrims is “undoubtedly tied to the historical and transcultural

²⁹⁶ Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 178-79.

²⁹⁷ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 47.

²⁹⁸ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 48.

connections associated with the spread of Buddha's teachings."²⁹⁹ Since the Buddha's *parinirvana*, or 'nirvana after death,' the sites have been revered via the patronage of emperor Asoka, Faxian and Xuanzang's travelogues, the Burmese missions, Sir Edwin Arnold's *Light of Asia*, Anagarika Dharmapala's efforts at reclaiming Buddhist sites, and many other Buddhists' activities around the world. The sites, Sarnath and Bodhgaya, have been subject to contestation due to the varying motivations of the different stakeholders.

Moreover, as I indicated in the first chapter, the Buddha's image itself has gone through several transformations within the Hindu context. During the time that Buddhism was viewed as a threat by orthodox Hindu groups, the Buddha had been incorporated and subordinated within the Hindu context as a deceitful avatara of Lord Visnu.³⁰⁰ This Hindu image of the Buddha was rehabilitated at the 1893 World Parliament of Religions by Swami Vivekananda, who promulgated the Buddha's role as a great teacher and reformer within a modern, Indian nationalist context. Vivekananda's construction of Hindu spirituality and its relationship with nationalism has influenced thinkers like Gandhi and Nehru, and many other Western 'spiritual' movements (including the New Age movement).³⁰¹ Spirituality was no longer tied to belief, but to reason and science. The Ayurvedic garden and the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom exemplify the commodification of yoga, meditation, and therapy as spiritual tools to promote wellness.

After independence, Nehru encouraged religious neutrality and employed Vivekananda's interpretation of the Buddha as a great Indian reformer to maintain peace

²⁹⁹ Geary, "India's Buddhist circuit(s)," 49.

³⁰⁰ Holt, *The Buddhist Visnu*, 12.

³⁰¹ Peter Van der Veer, "Global Breathing: Religious Utopias in India and China," *Anthropological theory* 7, no. 3 (2007): 319.

among the various religious traditions, especially in the face of the partition. As a result, many national symbols are Buddhist: Dharma Chakra (Wheel) and the Asokan pillar, both of which are location-specific to Sarnath. Since 2002, the coveted status of the Mahabodhi Temple Complex as a WHS site, development plans, and promotional campaigns like IIC have remarkably shaped and intensified the significance of India's Buddhist pilgrimage sites.

Embedded in the development plans for the Buddhist Circuit is the preservation and management of heritage sites. As Tunbridge and Ashworth note, heritage:

is a product of the present, purposefully developed in response to current needs or demands for it, and shaped by those requirements. It makes two sorts of intergenerational links both of which are determined by the present. The present selects an inheritance from an imagined past for current use and decides what should be passed on to an imagined future.

This fits well when considering the Mahabodhi Temple Complex, despite its past as a site of reverence for both Hindu and Buddhist groups, which Dharmapala had claimed to be strictly Buddhist. The 2002 UNESCO WHS designation raised more concerns regarding its conservation and religious significance and has contributed to a dominant view of the site that links Bodhgaya to an authentic Buddhist past.³⁰² However, whose heritage has been preserved? The "universal" quality assigned to the temple has theoretically swept aside some of the conflicts about management and authority over the site and has generated new forms of conflict and resistance, especially among the local stakeholders who fear that conservation practices and new forms of revenue may undermine local sovereignty and residents. My review and analysis of the social history of both sites show that there is a conflict between the residents, the Government of India and the Ministry of

³⁰² Geary, "Destination Enlightenment: Buddhism," 185.

Tourism, the Buddhist pilgrims, and the international tourists. The Maha Bodhi Temple has been a contested site for a long time, especially since Dharmapala attempted to rescue it from the Giri Mahant. Since its WHS designation, disputes surrounding the temple have intensified. While the national and state governments are promoting Bodhgaya as a world-class tourist destination, the laws surrounding the 1-km buffer zone have seriously thrown into question exactly who is benefitting from the economic revenue from tourism.

My fieldwork reveals that Sarnath, although not yet a major hub for tourists and pilgrims, is also subject to conflict. For example, in Chapter Two, I noted that the tourists and the pilgrims were part of completely different networks. While the Buddhists have well-established transnational networks that allow them to enjoy their pilgrimage along the Buddhist Circuit with ease, the lack of development and facilities in Sarnath has negatively affected the international tourists' experiences. The domestic tourists, who account for the highest number of travelers to Sarnath, are mostly excluded by the local residents because they do not view them as the *right* type of visitors. For example, I was only allowed to visit the Garden of Spiritual Wisdom and the CIHTS campus because the staff recognized I was an international tourist. There is also conflict between the state government and the Buddhist monks and pilgrims. This is especially related to the government officials' management of Buddhist sacred sites, such as the archaeological excavated site. The lack of proper maintenance has also delayed the site's designation on the World Heritage Sites list. Additionally, there is no Buddhist committee in Sarnath (like the Bodhgaya Temple Management Committee) to oversee the usage of the sites and to support their development. Nearly all the people I spoke with were unhappy with the condition of the Deer Park, which is being advertised as a mini zoo. There was little

indication that tourism was benefitting the locals working in the industry, especially the shop vendors.

In addition to potential economic revenue, Buddhist concepts and symbols were utilized to help Bihar rebrand itself as “Blissful Bihar” in contrast to its image as a crime-prone location. These efforts led to several master plans and tourism-related investment projects that have been supported by Buddhist countries, such as Japan. The Overseas Economic Cooperation Fund and Japan Bank of International Cooperation have provided substantial financial assistance for conservation and infrastructure development projects.³⁰³ According to “Investing in the Buddhist Circuit, 2014-2018,” the aim is to transform Buddhist sites related to the Buddha’s life and provide a “holistic tourism experience.” The authors of this scheme predict that focusing on the Buddha’s sacred geography has enormous potential for the expansion of Buddhist Tourism. However, the Buddhist pilgrims are generally low-spending travelers, and such tourism is limited in comparison to India’s popular leisure circuits, such as the “golden triangle” that connects Delhi, Agra, and Jaipur.³⁰⁴

In order to expand the circuit’s market reach, three “experience pillars” have been highlighted in the document: pilgrimage; ancient heritage; and mind, body, and spirit. As I have discussed in previous chapters, the main selling point according to IIC is “experiences.” Since its launch in 2017, ‘Incredible India 2.0’ has exclusively focused on spiritual tourism, which includes medical and wellness tourism (like Ayurveda and yoga). The aim of this campaign is to “shift from generic promotions undertaken across the

³⁰³ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 52.

³⁰⁴ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 53.

world to market specific promotional plans and content creation with thematic creatives on different niche products.”³⁰⁵ The most recent marketing strategy involves the use of social media sites like Instagram and Twitter, and encourages travelers or residents of India to submit their pictures (as per the week or month’s theme) to be featured in the National Geographic Travel India Magazine.



Figure 17. “You Get What You Focus On.” Source: Incredible!India Instagram, May 2018.

An interest in the promotion of religious or spiritual tourism (as compared to other forms of tourism), especially in relation to the Buddhist Circuit, may be explained by the sites’ potential to attract millions of Buddhists globally. The financial assistance from other Buddhist countries, specifically Japan, has stimulated an interest in the development of the Buddhist Circuit. Furthermore, “circuits provide a key mechanism for pooling resources to maximize infrastructure and brand management... Religious circuits help to standardize and segment the intangible experience of tourism into a thermalized and

³⁰⁵ Union Minister of Tourism Shri K.J. Aponis, "Incredible India 2.0 Launched to Promote Tourism," (Press Information Bureau, Ministry of Tourism, Government of India, 2018), <http://pib.nic.in/newsite/PrintRelease.aspx?relid=176966>.

saleable product.”³⁰⁶ Religious circuits may also appeal to those who are not religiously invested since these are also connected to health, wellness, heritage, and spirituality. The latest promotion of the Buddhist Circuit also includes other popular sites that have attracted more international tourists. For instance, the ‘Buddhist Circuit Tourist Train’ mentioned previously includes a visit to the Taj Mahal. This indicates that the target audiences are the wealthy international and Asian travelers, not pilgrims or other low-budget spenders. It may also point to the fact that India’s religious tourism has largely attracted domestic tourists in comparison to international travelers.

Recently, the development of the Buddhist Circuit has expanded to include sites beyond UP and Bihar, including Ladakh (Jammu and Kashmir), Andhra Pradesh, Orissa, Ajanta-Ellora caves (Maharashtra), and Gujarat.³⁰⁷ The political interest in Buddhism, which started with Nehru, is still present today. Narendra Modi, the Prime Minister of India and a member of the Hindu nationalist Bhartiya Janata Party (BJP), has been a key proponent of India’s link to Buddhism.³⁰⁸ The promotion of religious tourism in India, especially the Buddhist Circuit, is still fairly recent. Hence, further research is required to understand some of the nuances underlying the tensions between the commodification of religious sites in comparison to other forms of tourism. The expansion of the Buddhist Circuit still relies on its connection to other popular destinations. I argue that the national government's approach to Buddhism as a pan-Asian tradition, since India’s emergence as a nation-state, has allowed for the emergence of numerous monasteries and temples.

³⁰⁶ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 55-56.

³⁰⁷ Geary, "India’s Buddhist circuit(s)," 56.

³⁰⁸ "India Had Never Been An Aggressor Nor Encroacher: Pm Modi," *The Indian Express*, 2018, <https://indianexpress.com/article/india/india-had-never-been-an-aggressor-nor-encroacher-pm-modi-5157867/>.

Bodhgaya has successfully become a major hub for pilgrims and tourists. However, until the national and state governments' development plans include the locals, as well as devout Buddhist pilgrims who view these Buddhist sites as living religious sites, the commoditization of Buddhist pilgrimage sites as international tourist destinations, will most likely suffer.

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